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MY HEART AND I.



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MY HEART AND I.

MY HEART AND I.

A *Nobel*.

BY

ELINOR HUME.

"The time is weary, the year is old,
And the light of the lily burns close to the mould :
The grave is cruel, the grave is cold,
But the other side is the city of gold,
My dearest heart ! My darling, darling heart !"

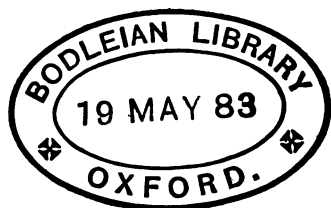


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MY HEART AND I.



CHAPTER I.

"THE day has been long," I sigh;
"long and lonely. Surely it is time she
were here."

I raise my head, and glance at the
timepiece; my own watch laid upon the
table at which I sit.

"Five to five, and she *knew* she would
be here by four. Oh, the long, long day!"

I bend my head again over my work.
A pretty work enough to look upon, but
to labour at! I wonder if the designer,
or lithographer, or any other grapher, or

vendor of a Christmas card, ever cared to buy one? No, I fancy not.

I have laboured at this sort of work for nearly ten years, and when once my design is finished, I never look upon it more ; and the mere mention of a Christmas, Birthday, or New Year's card, puts me in low spirits for ten minutes.

But after all, it is easy work compared with some that falls to the lot of women such as I.

Relationless, friendless, moneyless, how should I be a chooser in this busy world ! Well, I have not chosen. I have worked at what I could, for my darling's sake. "Ah, she is *long* in coming !"

I lift my head again. I can work no more. I am fidgetty. I look out of the window, down the street up which she will come—the High Street of F——, containing five thousand inhabitants,

not one of which—not one of which would I miss, were they “dead and laid in grave” to-night, save only she—she for whom I wait.

It is the eighteenth of April. The window is open. I rise and lean out of it, to try and catch sight of the tall, lithe figure, the golden hair, the laughing face. No; she still lingers.

I mark our curate hastening up the street, his eyes downcast, save when he passes *our* window, when they are raised for a moment, behold me, and—even from here I can detect the disappointment in them as he lifts his hat, and pursues his way. I wish he had not red hair, and a stoop, and ugly feet. I think if he were tolerably good-looking I might forgive him for loving her—at a distance.

Doctor Bland, junior, driving rapidly by, in his village cart, thinking of the

same person, probably, as the one who occupies my thoughts; unless he has some very urgent case in hand. He does not glance up. He is a dark-complexioned and self-controlled young man.

The two Miss Ryans, sisters to our rector, pass down the pavement on the opposite side of the street, see my white face craned out, and nod in friendly-wise, and do not look disappointed. Alas! it is only the elderly of my own sex, I'm afraid, who will henceforth regard me with favour.

No, not only the *elderly*. Heaven forbid, a thousand times! For she whom even now I can descry—no one *ever* had her walk,—she whom my heart goes out to meet, whose absence has made the day so long, she loves me. The only soul in the wide earth whose love I am *sure* of. It is such a familiar thing, this

love of hers ; it is with me in the morning, at noonday, at night. Familiar, and yet how rare, how beautiful is this her affection to me, words cannot say.

* * * * *

Is she looking sad or glad ? I peer out, eagerly trying to read the face that is as open to me as my heart. Glad ! glad all over ; lips half-smiling, cheeks flushed and dimpling, and the bonniest brown eyes that ever were, beaming up at my pale visage, joyous as the sunlight itself.

I retire from the window. I purse up my mouth. It has smiled in sympathy with hers. I corrugate my brows, they are dark and heavy. I tell myself I am tired—dreadfully tired and ill-used—decidedly ill-used. Tears start into my miserable dark-grey eyes. Trust dark-grey eyes to look sorrowful. They have the “trick” better than any other coloured

orb. I push away my half-finished work, and pettishly fling the flower I have copied into the grate. I am prepared for her now: as a sick child for its mother—as the winter for the summer.

CHAPTER II.

*“ ‘ And as the genial sunlight to the beclouded earth,
and as its parent to the ailing child, she cometh unto
me, bringing light and comfort both.’*

“ HERE I am.”

“ You are late,” I say peevishly. I am lying down on the sofa, shading my eyes with my hand. It is only to those we love and trust implicitly we dare or care to show the small fretfulnesses of our natures. I want her to see I am cross and tired. She does, I think, and the comfort I am thirsting for comes to me as her hand clasps mine and takes it away imperiously from my aching eyes.

“ Why, Nina, tired, old duck ! cross as

anything, I'll be bound. Where's the tea? I'm famishing, though I've had no end of a lunch."

"You had better ring. I told Mrs. Riddel not to bring it up till you came in."

She walks across the floor in her blue cotton dress—she makes her own dresses and mine—with the gait of a savage it must be, nothing civilized ever had her wild grace of movement—pulls the bell, takes off her hat—I notice it is garlanded with laburnum sprays, yellow as her hair—and throws it on my knee. I take it up.

"You might have preserved these flowers for me," I grumble. "I wanted some laburnum."

"Preserve, preserve! It's always your cry! Do let one sometimes enjoy the present. Oh, Nina," sinking down by

the sofa, and catching hold of my arm, "I have such lots to tell you."

The servant entering with our tea causes a diversion. I give myself invalid airs. I want to be coaxed, and my darling humours me to the top of my bent. She feeds me with dainty bits ; she holds my cup of tea, and scolds my eyes for aching.

"You haven't told me anything yet," I observe more affably after a while.

"Oh, I've had a charming day!"

"And I haven't. Ah, Maggie, why cannot you stay with me and cheer me, instead of taking up with an occupation totally unfit for you?"

"Unfit! ah, you should have seen me to-day. I am a born teacher. My pupils, *such* dears! Ethel and Dolly they are called, ages six and eight, hair like gloss silk, faces of angels. No trouble to teach them, it's play."

“Did you see the Baroness?”

“Baroness La Touche? yes. She is an invalid—ugly, I thought—got some dreadful complaint, I believe paralysis, or something. She was very kind, told me I looked good-natured, the sort of person who would be fond of children. She did not talk with me for long, and I am to get forty pounds a year for playing with a couple of lovely children. Luck comes to us at last, Nina.”

“You do not think of me.”

“Yes I do, and I wish a thousand things for you, but at least let me try and not be a burden to you, a dead weight, a useless great greedy body——”

“Maggie!”

“Fancy my sitting here day after day, and watching you working, you little thin delicate thing, while I sprawled in an armchair and read a novel. I have been

so ashamed of myself, Nina! It is all your fault I have been so long idle; you have spoilt me, spoilt me, spoilt me. And if the La Touches hadn't happened to choose Fairthorne for a residence you would still have gone on spoiling me, and their children would have lost a valuable instructress. Be thankful something has at last turned up in the way of an occupation, requiring no brains to speak of, and forty pounds a year."

She leaves my side and waltzes round the room—one of the two rooms we inhabit in Mrs. Riddel's lodging-house. It is furnished with a piano, two tables, a sofa, an armchair, four straightbacked chairs, a dingy carpet, an ugly wall paper, two green glass vases, and a gilt clock that refuses to go, as chimney-piece ornaments. It is a tolerably large-sized room. Maggie has enough space for her

pas seul. There would be room enough for a partner, I think, only no man was ever born of woman handsome enough to match her perfect form and lovely face.

"You do not think of me," I repeat, "alone all day."

"Poor Ninnie, in the doldrums!"

She does not pause in her dance, and my eyes forget to ache regarding her.

"*Nina crudel*," she sings suddenly.

The blood rushes to my face. I start to my feet.

"*Nina crudel, Nina crudel*," chants the mocking voice.

I seize her arm as she passes me.

"Where did you hear that—that song?"

"What is the matter?" she asks.

"Nina excited, actually—eyes flashing, face like a turkey-cock."

She laughs her sweet, ringing laugh, and twines her arms round me. But I

am not to be pacified. I am trembling, my heart beats heavily.

“Who have you heard sing that?”

“I don’t know; there’s a mystery for you, you old goosie. It was a man’s voice, a sweet voice. Pshaw, Nina, it is a common thing enough, the serenade from Figaro. ‘*Com’ è gentil*—’ how does it go on?”

I sit down on the sofa. I feel the flush dying out of my face, the wild pulsation of my heart quieting. I call myself an old goose indeed.

“I was having lunch with my little pupils in the schoolroom, when I heard the strain which excites you so—sung far away outside somewhere.”

I make no remark. I am still calling myself an old goose to myself.

“Who has called this afternoon?” asks Maggie, seating herself beside me.

"No one."

"Ah, they must have known I was out. Do you know it was Dr. Bland, the old man, who got me my 'present situation.' He, it seems, is attending the Baroness, and reporting to her doctor in town, and he recommended me. One for Doctor Bland that. Shall I pay it to his son, Nina?"

"If you like."

"Have you been out?"

"No; I don't care to walk by myself."

"But, my darling, I cannot always walk with you now. Do you know, they want me to stay at Fairthorne till six, from nine till six, and so——"

"And so, *I* shall never see you all day. Maggie, do you care so very much for this new excitement—can you not throw it up and stay with me?"

I speak pleadingly. I lay my hand, trembling still, upon my sister's, persuasively.

"Nina, you must be mad! Consider how poor we are, how idle I have been, how kind Dr. Bland has been, how lucky we are to get such a good thing!" exclaims Maggie.

"But—" I begin weakly.

"But, I tell you for very *shame* I must do something; if not this, something else, perhaps worse. Shall I marry Doctor Bland, junior, or the curate, or ——"

"Maggie!"

"Well, you see there are deeper depths, and into them must I plunge for very shame, if you don't let me try and earn something. But you must go out walking, Nina, or you'll get ill; you really must. On Saturdays I have a half-holiday, and then there is Sunday; so

we'll have two outings together in the week, you see, and presently we'll grow rich."

I give in, of course. I always do give in to Maggie's wishes at last, no matter how fiercely I oppose them at first. I get off the sofa and sit on the floor at her feet, lay my head, weary enough in truth, against her knee, and presently to the lullaby of her soft tones, I fall asleep to dream, as Heaven sometimes wills the sad-hearted shall, blissfully.

{

CHAPTER III.

“ ‘*Nina crudel . . . il tuo fedel.*’

I am sorry,” says Maggie compunctuously, as I start wildly from my quarter of an hour’s slumber, and stare with bewildered eyes at her face bending over me.

“I—— Can voices *haunt* one, Nina? I did not mean to sing those words, but I think I must have been dreaming, and that voice, it *was* a sweet one, I heard it singing, singing, it still keeps singing always in my ears. ‘*Ben mio perchè ancor non vieni, a me?*’ Can voices *haunt* one?”

“I dare say.”

“Nina,” she continues feverishly, “I

want to hear about your love affair to-night—your one great love affair. I'm in the humour."

"I have often related it."

"I know, but I want you to tell me all the details, all the little things you know, the colour. You do not tell the story well, Nina; you slur it over—you give just the bare facts. . . . Don't get up—sit where you are; and it is growing dusk, just the time for a love story. I shall not see your blushes. Stay, *I* will fill in the outlines of the romance—you have told it me so often—and you shall add the colour.

"When I was seven and you were seventeen, thirteen years ago, we lived with our parents in London town. I was delicate—you wouldn't think so to look at me now—and was sent to a school at the seaside. You had just

finished your education, and showed a remarkable taste and talent for painting. We were pretty well off in those days. Was it not so ? ”

“ Yes, pretty well.”

“ We kept our carriage. Our father had some appointment in the city. I can only very faintly remember him. Our mother was—well and happy. Only on your word, Nina, can I ever believe that ; she was *so* different, as I remember her. . . . Well, there came a young man a’ courtin’ you in this here London town—a penniless “ sub.” in the Queen’s *armee*. You met ; ’twas at a dance ; and he loved the floor you danced on. Did you dance very badly, Nina ? ”

“ Very.”

“ Went quite out of step and time, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes.”

"No matter, he loved you all the same—he could not have had corns in those days—and he called, and our parents were introduced, and he called again and yet again, and he saw you at church, in the park; and one day—no, evening—he dined at our whilom home, and after dinner, when you and he were looking over some paintings of yours, prize paintings, he asked you to be his—and you said, 'yes'?"

"I believe so."

"And our parents said, 'yes'; and all went merrily for a—week, wasn't it?"

"Just a week."

"When our father announced to you two poor women that he was a ruined man—that some bank had broken and left him and us penniless—as penniless as the pennilessest "sub." in the army. He bade you cancel your engagement, and

you obeyed ; and the penniless "sub."— what was his name, Coulter, wasn't it?— and you, took a farewell of each other, promising to love each other for ever and ever ? ”

“ For ever and ever.”

“ And soon after this affecting parting, our father shot himself, and our mother fell into ill health ; and then a year or two years after we came to live here, and you taught me, and nursed our poor mother, our poor dying mother ; and we struggled on, we three, and you were the prop, the guide, the comforter, ah, Nina—— ”

“ That is not part of the love-story, my child.”

“ And ever since that most mournful time, you have slaved for our daily bread—— ”

“ And now *you* are beginning. But all

this is not romantic, Maggie ; and let us not be sorry for mamma, now. She has been in heaven nine years, and must have forgotten all her pain, long ago . . .”

“ And were you allowed to correspond, you and Mr. Coulter ? ”

“ No.”

“ So you never heard from him ? ”

“ Yes. I have a note of his, written during that week, about some flowers. It is not long.”

“ You never heard of him again ? ”

“ Never.”

“ Poor Nina, poor Nina ! I am sentimental to-night. Put in the colour for me. It is no love-story, that which I have told. Tell me, was it in the spring you were engaged—in May ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And was the laburnum out, and did your lover sing, ‘ *Com' è gentil* ’ ? ”

“Yes.”

“I might have known it! And after all these years it has power to move you still—the mere singing of a word or two of that old song.”

I am silent. Thirteen years have been blotted out of my life. I smell the faint scent of dying laburnum flowers. I feel the soft fresh air of a spring evening. I hear a voice singing in a tone that thrills my heart with a delight that is half-painful. The pressure of a hand——

“Tell me, Nina,” asks Maggie, in a half-whisper, “did you ever sit together in the dusk like this? and did you feel his arm stealing round you? and did his lips find yours? and were his kisses warm and long?——”

I push my short dark hair from my temples, and rise staggeringly to my feet, trying to wake myself to the present, and

shake off the memory so keenly sweet; so intolerably far away.

“And in the pauses of those kisses, did you hear him whispering—whispering mad, fond words—utterly senseless; but oh! so unutterably dear, so——”

“Maggie, enough!” I say, and I am ashamed of my voice, it is so hoarse and shaken.

“Nina, is it possible,” ejaculates Maggie in amazement, “that you are crying! You, after all these years, crying over the thought of—— Well, I am astonished! What can this love be like? I had no idea you cared still, my poor old sister! that you cherished still the love of your youth!”

“I am not well,” I say miserably. “I tell you my head aches dreadfully. And as for crying, I am not crying.”

“Are you sure if I were to pass my

fingers over those aching eyes of yours, I would find no moisture there? And are those poor thin cheeks quite dry? What did you say?"

"I say, we had better have our supper and go to bed."

"All right. I'm sure I shall dream of that voice—'*Com' è gentil, la notte a mezzo april . . .*'"

* * * *

Two hours later I am bending over her as she lies asleep beside me, her hair half-plaited, half loosely sweeping the pillow with its golden beauty. I take up a lock and press it to my lips. I watch the white eyelids, placid as a child's, the rounded cheek, the calm mouth and brow.

"You are not dreaming of any voice yet, my dearest," I murmur. "Heaven keep your sleep always as unhaunted!"

I am sleepless. The aching leaves my

eyes and forehead by degrees ; but I am sleepless. Before me, it passes and re-passes, as though it had happened but yesterday, the bright, sweet pageant of a seven days' love-making. The smile, the glance, the indescribable thrill that shook my heart . . . the blood that surged, and tingled through my body for each and all of these, my lover's love-tokens . . .

"I am tired," I sigh, "of this memory ; it gives me pain. I would to God I could sleep !"

Oh, for the gay sweet voice, and the strong young arm, whose tone and whose touch would live ! Their phantoms played upon my spirit until, at length, the tears I had denied all day came raining from my eyes, and the lips that kissed them away were only a phantom's too.

CHAPTER IV.

I AM sitting at my work next morning, a fair sunny morning, when from his house opposite I see Dr. Bland, senior, issue forth and make his way across the street to our lodgings. He is not a bit like his son. Before they turned white his hair and beard were of the fairest flaxen shade ; they are now as soft as ever in texture, and almost as luxuriant. He is of short stature. His eyes are blue, faded somewhat in colour, but, gaining every year, it seems to me, more kindness and softness of expression. He is between fifty and sixty years of age, and has lived twenty years at F—— as a doctor.

His son shares his practice now. His daughters are married. His wife has been dead for twelve years. He is perhaps the best loved man in F——.

He and I are great friends. He attended our mother in her last illness, myself in several small ailments, Maggie during an attack of measles and whooping-cough; and, besides all this, he has shared a dream with me, its hopes and fears, its periods of despair, its blissful periods; and, lastly, he and I have dug a grave and buried it out of sight, and the grave is in both our hearts.

“Painting away,” he says cheerily, as he enters the room.

I gladly lay down my brush and rise to greet him.

“Laburnum spray, eh?” he asks, observing a bit of blossom in the tumbler near my hand, which Maggie had worn in

her hat yesterday, and we had remembered to put in water before we went to bed.

"Yes, I am not making much of it, I fear."

"And yet they sell well, these cards of yours. I had no idea, until you took it up, that the work was so remunerative."

He seats himself on the sofa between the windows.

"I came to ask how Maggie likes her situation. She went to Fairthorne yesterday?"

"Yes, and appeared delighted with everything. She is there now. It was very kind of you to recommend her," I add lamely.

He smiles kindly, a little wistfully at me for answer.

"It will be a great help to us," I continued dispiritedly. "Forty pounds to swell our hundred."

"Thirty of which you make, you clever child. What ails you, Nina? do you work too hard?"

"Oh no; oh dear no! You would be surprised to know how idle I am, Dr. Bland, what a lot of time I waste; but the painting is so fine, it tries my eyes and makes my head ache."

"You must go out more. To-day——"

"But Maggie does not come back till six."

"You must go out without Maggie."

"It is dull without her, it is hateful without her!"

"You are angry with me for getting her the place?"

I get red and turn away.

"You are not selfish, Nina?"

"Yes, I am."

"No, you are not. Do you know," he goes on gently, "that it is a good thing

for Maggie to have some settled employment. For a girl, good-looking—— ”

“ Beautiful.”

“ ——Beautiful, high-spirited, full of health and vigour, for such an one idleness is dangerous, is—is fatal to the well-being—— ”

“ She was never idle—— ”

“ Of mind and body. She was never absolutely idle all day, perhaps.”

“ She made our dresses, and read to me.”

“ And had plenty of time to dream day-dreams and loll about as well. No, I am in hopes at last we have found a good thing for her. Her thoughts are occupied, her interest excited, and herself made happy by the knowledge that she is helping you.”

“ And I am alone all day. You do not think of me.”

My assertion meets no contradiction. I glance at the doctor after a moment's silence, and find him looking at me with an expression so kind and wistful, I am repentant of my ungraciousness.

"Forgive me! You are the only one, except Maggie, who ever does think of me."

"Are you sure?"

I do not answer, for suddenly in the room there is the presence of the past again; the scents and sounds, the mystic thrill fill my senses as they did yesterday. The glamour of the long ago love-making that has kept me wakeful all night is upon me again . . .

"I must be off," says Dr. Bland, rising and holding out his hand. "I have a good many cases to get through this morning. Good-bye, Nina; perhaps there are more people thinking of you than you

believe, and some who think more of you than you will ever know."

I scarcely hear him. I take his hand as in a dream. And as in a dream I see his kind face sadden as he leaves me. The past is all about me again. I get up restlessly, and pace the room.

It was a cruel act to awaken such a memory. These ghosts of romance, these long-dead loves, it is ill to disturb them!

"It died very hard, that love of mine," I muse. "Would to Heaven its wraith would rest quietly. . . ."

A sudden desire seizes me to play the serenade from Figaro. I tell myself the air once heard fairly would lay the spirit of my unlucky past. I search among our music books and find the song I seek. I have played the air over, and have just begun to sing, when the curate is announced, and enters blushing. He

holds an enormous bunch of wild flowers in his hands—primroses, violets, wood anemones, mingled in wild confusion, lovely in themselves, ridiculous in juxtaposition with his laughable visage.

“How do you do? I didn’t know you sang,” he says awkwardly. And then, from the effect of his letting them go with one hand, the flowers fall, most of them, hither and thither on the faded carpet. He tries to pick them up, and I help him. His feet are large, and his boots ill-made; they tread upon the tender blossoms and crush several to death.

“I didn’t know you sang.”

“I don’t, as a rule. I have no voice. I wanted to try something. I had forgotten—half forgotten the air of—What lovely flowers! I don’t think it is any use picking up the rest.”

"I thought you might like them to paint."

His watery-blue eyes gleam genially upon me, as I take the nosegay from him and lay it on my painting-table.

"Thank you, won't you sit down? My sister is out."

He sits down, and looks at his red hands for a moment in silence.

"I—I hear she has—she is—I mean, she teaches the Baroness's children, at—at Fairthorne," he stammers; and looks at his feet instead of his hands, as if he hated them. I sympathize with him, and look at them also with a malevolent eye, as I answer—

"Yes. She is trying how she likes it. It is about time she did something." He starts at my tone, as I mean him to.

"I hope she will like it," he says earnestly; and I almost like him for a

second, as he regards me with an honest solicitude upon his face, a boyish fervour in his eyes. "But—but between us, Miss Delaine, it's hardly ; it seems hardly a suitable situation for her."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see,"—he has forgotten his boots altogether, and his hands have a life of their own just now, as they turn and fidget and strain with one another—"she is so—so young."

"Seventeen ; not too young for a governess to young children," I say cruelly.

"No, not exactly that ; but she is so—so high-spirited."

"All the better for the children."

"Yes ; but, of course—yes—but she's so—so unlike most girls."

"Do you think so ? Her life, perhaps, has been too lonely. She will have com-

panionship now. Mr. Williams, can I offer you anything—a glass of sherry ? ”

“ No, thank you—no. As we were saying, I—I hope she’ll get on well ; but somehow it seems so—so incongruous.”

“ What ? ” I ask sharply.

“ Her being a—a *governess*,” he cries, looking blankly at the crushed primroses on the carpet.

“ You forget,” I continue in the same tone, “ that we are poverty-stricken. We must live somehow. I cannot earn enough for us both. It is right Maggie should do her share. And in what other way, pray, could she do so ? ”

He does not answer. He has picked up one of the bruised blossoms, and is trying to smooth it out with his clumsy fingers.

“ Maggie has no particular talent or taste, except, indeed, for dressmaking.

She sews beautifully, and can trim or make a bonnet à *merveille*, but then——”

“She is so perfectly lovely,” he bursts out tremulously, forgetting his shyness for the moment. “She does not look meant for work, it seems sacrilege——”

I think my smile stops him, for I do not speak.

He gets up and glances round the room in sore bewilderment.

“She is too lovely for anything but marriage!—For marriage with the highest and noblest in the land,” he supplements eagerly, his blue eyes in a blaze.

“Unfortunately,” I say drily, as I extend my hand for him to shake, “the highest and noblest do *not* frequent these apartments; nor do I know, alas, where they are to be sought in F——”

CHAPTER V.

SOME tedious hours of work. A bunch of primroses and wind-flowers growing on the paper beneath my brush into a fair semblance of the real blossoms—a scentless, lifeless semblance. A slight interruption ; the gas lit, the shutters closed ; some more labour, and then a fresh cheek laid on mine and the dearest voice in all the world saying, “ Why, Nina, you naughty girl, I don’t believe you have set a step out of doors to-day ! ”

“ I have been interested in my work,” I say, laying down my brush, and pushing my chair from the table. “ Mr. Williams brought me these flowers, and I have

been working at them ever since—rather successfully ? ”

“ Beautiful ! They look quite real, those primroses. So Mr. Williams has been here ; and who else ? your lover and my lover ? Sounds as if the same man loved us both ; but you know what I mean — the doctors, have they been here ? ”

She has taken off her hat, and lain herself down on the sofa.

“ One of them.”

“ Which ? ”

“ Mine ! ” I say, and laugh. “ How absurd of you to talk of him so, Maggie,” I add, stretching my weary arms, and rubbing the back of my neck.

“ Not at all. He’s very fond of you, that I can testify. I shall never forget the jobations he has given me about your artistic capabilities. He was con-

fidant you would be the first lady-artist in the land. He believed in you, as you believed in yourself. You and he quite made up your minds that Nina Delaine was a name destined to ring proudly through the world—alas !”

“ We have buried that dream long ago, my child, as you well know.”

“ I don’t know—*he* hasn’t; at least, he still believes in your genius, or if not in your genius, your goodness, your superlative goodness. I wish he knew how cross you are to your poor little sister sometimes. Hallo! Some one has been singing ‘ *Com’ è gentil,* ’ ” pointing to the piano, where that unlucky serenade still stands.

I get hot all over.

“ Why, Nina ! ”

“ I—I found it among our music,” I stammer, unreasonably ashamed of myself.

“ You’ve been trying it over. Oh, the romance of the aged! Oh, for the love that never forgets! Years may roll—time destroy—yet—— ”

A sort of passion seizes me as she speaks—a rage, not so much at her jibing tone, as at my own weakness; I snatch the song from the piano, and tear it into small pieces.

“ You vixen! What a temper you have, Nina! ” cries Maggie, laughing till she nearly chokes herself. “ Tragedy! a deep wild tragedy! Oh, *my*, you will kill me! ”

“ Be quiet, Maggie.”

“ I can’t! I—oh! ”

I stand helplessly regarding the bits of music on the floor, feeling as foolish as possible, my chest heaving, my heart beating furiously; and then suddenly my emotion changes its character and I join

in Maggie's mirth with a wildness which fairly alarms her. At this very inopportune moment the door is opened by Mrs. Riddel's maid, who announces Dr. Bland, junior—Dr. George, we always call him.

Maggie regains her composure with an effort. I am in worse case. I seem to have completely lost control of my risible muscles. I take the best course left me. I cover as much of my insanely mirthful face as I can with my handkerchief, and rush past Dr. George with a hasty nod, only observing the pucker between his brows to be deeper than usual. In our bedroom, which is up another short flight of stairs, (it is dark, except for the faint reflection of a street lamp on the wall), I indulge in wild cachinnations for awhile, with my head under the pillow, and then suddenly grow serious and begin to cry. This last phase of weakness I

resolutely check, and opening the window I lean out to quiet myself. One or two stars look down upon me with a distrustful tremble in their dim and distant eyes. With my glance raised to them, I listen to the footfall of the few pedestrians who are making their way up or down High Street. A child's that, it is so quick and light and uncertain, a girl-child's. A boy's that, following her closely, now running, now stopping to play. A young man's that, quick, firm, unhesitating. A——"

I draw my head in, for the owner of the step suddenly begins to whistle in time to his tread—to whistle softly that haunted, hateful air, "*Com' è gentil.*" He whistles well. I am obliged to allow this, while sitting on our bed, impatiently tapping my foot on the floor.

It dies away in the distance. I poke

my head out of the window again, and far up the street I descry a man's figure. It returns—the tread, not the whistle, and the figure comes closer. It has an overcoat on. It is tall and broad-shouldered, the shade of the wideawake hat entirely shrouds the face. He stops, and puts his hand into his pockets, first one and then the other, searching doubtless for his cigar-case. While so engaged he begins to whistle again softly to himself—the air I am learning to hate, and fear.

I close the window, and begin to wonder why Dr. George is paying so lengthy a visit. Almost directly I hear our sitting-room door open abruptly, hear a quick step down the stairs, the hall door open and bang harshly, and rising with alacrity I throw up the window and project my head in time to see Dr. George walk

away arm-in-arm with the whistler. I make haste to rejoin Maggie, and find her standing under the gaselier, apparently lost in thought.

“What a time he stayed! What have you been talking about?”

She puts her hand to her forehead, and pushes away some of the clustering curls that will cling to her temples.

“Why did you go away?” she asks, reproachfully.

“My darling, how could I help it? was I in a fit state to converse, or even to listen courteously. What *did* he think of me?”

She does not answer. She walks to the mantelpiece and leans her elbow upon it, as though preoccupied.

“Did Dr. George notice I was laughing?”

“Laughing? Oh, yes, he said something about your appearing hysterical.”

“What have you been talking about?” I ask again. “He has vexed you,” I add, coming nearer to her.

She lifts her head and regards me with a startled expression.

“Why should it—I be vexed?” she stammers.

“He has proposed, perhaps.”

The anxious look passes from her face at my words.

“Yes,” she answered quietly, “you are right. I have known it has been pending for some time. I have carefully avoided a *tête-à-tête* on that account; and now ——”

“Well, it doesn’t matter; it’s well over.”

“Don’t joke about it, please,” she says. “He was very much in earnest. He is not like the others.”

“Those poor boys at Mr. Ryan’s, how you laughed at them; and if——”

"They were different. . . . He turned so white, Nina, and his voice shook so, he could hardly speak."

"Poor man! yet I won't pity him, for he has made you sad, Maggie."

"Nina," she says after a pause—and again the startled look is in her eyes as they seek mine—"when men are in such pain as he was, they will say *anything*, won't they—no matter how mad, or how untrue?"

"You forget. I never have had the pleasure of refusing any man. What did he dare to say to you, my dearest?"

"Oh, nothing—much—nothing worth repeating."

She moves away from the mantelpiece uneasily, and stands under the gaslight, looking round the room, as if she fancies the doctor's stinging words are lying in ambush behind the chairs or under the table.

CHAPTER VI.

It is a lonely week to me. Saturday, to which I look forward, fades into a common day on its approach, for Maggie does not come back early after all, because the children entreat her to stay and play with them. I begin to dislike those children. About seven o'clock she arrives.

Reader, have you ever felt that *something* has come between you and a dear one, during perhaps an absence of a half-hour. Like Jonah's gourd, this veil, this brick wall, this ghost, this iron bar, rises up between you and your sun, your solace, your soul. You know not what to make

of this thing—it is hard, it is soft, impenetrable, yielding.

Imagination! you gasp, trying vainly and with frantic effort to disbelieve the change.

It is there. In a thousand ways it shows itself, this subtle difference. You might as well deny your own existence as its presence, or describe your struggle with a nightmare, as the horror of its hold on you.

Maggie is in good health, good humour, good spirits. She laughs me out of my gloom, and coaxes me out of my resentment at her desertion. She tells me amusing tales of her pupils. We sup together merrily. I am gayer than my wont. And all the time I *know* there is something between us that has never troubled us before. I do not own this to myself. I call it a sensation. I accuse

myself of nervousness. We go to bed chatting cheerily of many things. I fall quickly asleep, with a mind that should be at rest. Only it is not. The sense of trouble grows in my slumber. I wake with a start, my heart beating as with fear. Maggie is not asleep, she is out of bed, standing by the window in her night-dress, looking through a chink in the venetian blind. Moonlight streams into the room. In its rays she stands; it turns her hair silver where it touches it; it pales her cheeks, and makes her outward-gazing eyes mysterious.

“Maggie.”

I can see her start slightly at my voice.

“I thought you were asleep. I am looking at the moonlight.”

“My dear child, did you never see moonlight before? You will catch cold. What made you get up?”

"My heart was beating so, I can't think what ails it, it is beating still—so."

"I hope it is," I say jokingly. "Come into bed and don't be silly."

"I like watching the moonlight, Nina, it is so calm and quiet, it soothes——"

"Maggie, are you in a fever?"

She comes to me at the alarmed sound of my voice, and nestles down beside me.

I feel her hands, her forehead, her pulse, my own trebling its somewhat rapid beat with the foreboding that grows heavily upon me.

"I'm all right, Nina *mia*," she says fondly. "I'm only like the children, excited with my holiday."

I watch her eyes close, the lids fall slowly and the dark lashes rest upon her cheek. As I do so, a sudden impulse, foreign to my behaviour, if not to my nature, overpowers me. I fling my arms

about her, round her lithe body I twine them strainingly.

“My heart,” I whisper passionately, gazing into her now wide open eyes, “nothing shall ever separate us—not death, nor life, nothing; nobody shall ever come between us. Say it, promise it, my heart, my heart!”

“Nina, what——”

“Swear it, oh, swear it! I shall die if you do not.”

I bury my face on her breast, and sob in tearless excitement.

“I knew it would be so,” I hear her saying. “You are quite worn out with that horrid painting and being alone, and never going out. My darling,” she goes on, putting her arms about me and kissing me in her own loving way, “you *must* be morbid to dream for a moment that anything could separate us—*us*. “Go to

sleep again," she adds coaxingly, "you are overtired."

Already I have loosed my grasp of her, already my impulse is dead. I appear comforted, soothed. I return her kisses, her tender words. She tries to make a little joke, I laugh, we both laugh; and I turn from her and fall asleep, and she. I think, does not sleep much; and in the morning *it is still between us.*

The sky is grey all over. It is raining drearily; an unsteady wind sweeps wailing in loud discontent down the street one moment, and utters but a sigh or a small whine the next. I see it turn Dr. Bland's umbrella inside out as he struggles round the corner, and then a few moments after scarcely find strength to lift the skirt of Dr. George's overcoat.

Maggie envelopes herself in a grey waterproof ulster that has seen its best

days. She is in a gay humour. Her sleepless night has not depressed her one wit, nor dimmed one sparkle in her shining eyes. It could not have been sorrow or pain, or anxiety that made her restless; it must have been excitement, as she said, pleasurable excitement.

I superintend her wrapping up. I have always taken care of her, coddled her, as she says, ever since she was a baby. I insist upon her taking a pair of dry shoes to wear when she arrives at Fairthorne. I see that her dress and petticoats are safe from the muddy road, and well covered with the waterproof. She puts the hood over her hat; one golden curl, which the damp incites to curl more saucily than usual, peeps out at her neck.

"There, I hope I am ugly enough to please you," she laughs.

Ugly! her face shines out of the sombre shabby cloak like a triumph. No sordid surroundings could ever put her rare beauty to shame. It is inextinguishable as a star's, independent as the scarlet poppy's. I am so used to it, and yet every now and then it comes upon me as a surprise. It half takes my breath away. I forget everything in its contemplation. I am at soul an artist after all.

“Good-bye, Granny” (one of her pet names for me).

I let her go down the couple of steps from the door when I recollect something I wish to tell her. I call her, she springs up the steps to my side in a moment.

“I want to remind you, in case you might make any promises, that next Sunday is the mother's birthday, and we must pick the flowers for her grave on

Saturday, so you must take your half holiday."

"I am sorry." The crimson, no not crimson, but scarlet rushes to her face as she speaks. "But I—they—I have promised."

"Maggie, already?"

"I—I couldn't help it—Nina, really I *could not* help it. They—want me to take a walk."

"Tell them you cannot."

"It is too late, I have promised."

The colour has surged away from her face, even from her lips a little. Her eyes have the startled look so new to them.

"Then the mother's grave will go undecked for the first time since she died."

"I am sorry. I cannot say more. I did not remember. Nina, I must go; it is getting late."

She waits to hear no more. It is perhaps as well, for bitter words are rushing helter-skelter to my lips, urged by I know not what of terror and of pain pressing on me from the source unknown.

I shut the door, go upstairs, and in a bewildered way get ready my work. No sooner have I done so than I find I am far too restless to remain indoors. I make believe to myself that I want some different kind of card-board for my next flower group.

As I look in the glass to arrange my hat and veil, my attention is arrested by a new expression on my pallid face. Fear! Yes, that is what I see imprinted there—a hard controlled fear.

It looks out of my sad grey eyes; it shows in the curves of my somewhat bitter mouth, in the tension about my

brows. In spite of its pallor, its sadness, its anxiety, there is too much individuality, too much intellect, too much passion in the face to allow of it being insignificant.

I am fond of my own face. I like to watch its varying expressions; to pity the loneliness that regards me from its wondrously sorrowful orbs. I like my own smile too, when I observe it in the mirror—it is so slow, so sad, so sweet.

They say plain people are as a rule more vain than those endowed with beauty, and I am, I suppose, an instance of this idiosyncrasy in human nature.

I don't believe Maggie has ever bestowed the study on her lovely face that I have on my—well—unlovely one.

She might have been painted from the colours one sees at noon-day, when the sun is shining; I, by those dim hues

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one rather feels than sees under the moon.

Through her fair skin there runs a golden tint, like the sunshine on a flesh-coloured rose. Her eyes are golden-brown, like an unshadowed pool. Her lips are scarlet, reminding one of the poppies twined round the haymaker's hat. Her hair the sun's own colour.

By way of contrast, my hair is as the shade cast by some gloomy cedar when the moon shines bright. My cheek, its rays upon a wood anemone. My lips, the dim crimson of the rose, whose glow they have subdued; my eyes, the night sky, when the day is dawning.

I please myself with this poetical description, yet in truth my face does not merit it. It lacks not only beauty, but the charm that is more potent than beauty, youth.

On Maggie's lovely face there is still the bloom of the peach, the freshness of morning, the subtle something that disappears from a woman's face before she begins to look old. I shall soon begin to look old. Age will creep into my eyes, as this new fear has, without my knowledge, without my power to hinder it.

What must be, must be. We are but the sport of circumstances, the creatures of a day.

Cloaked and hatted, I find my umbrella and sally forth.

I encounter the eldest Miss Ryan. She is a person, *the* one person in the world, who stirs the very worst dregs of my in nowise exemplary nature.

At the mere sight of her I feel my mouth taking its most bitter curves. My nose, an insignificant but pliable feature,

forms itself sneeringly, my eyes stare stonily.

There is nothing in her to hate, or even to dislike. She is tall, with a florid complexion, coarse features, and stupid eyes. She wears a chronic smile. She is always good-humoured. She is full of Christian charity. She dresses vilely.

"How are you, Miss Delaine?" she asks gushingly as I endeavour to pass her without seeming to see her.

We shake hands. She wears black woollen gloves a size too large for her.

"Horrid day," I observe.

"It is wet, but then I think there is something very refreshing in this spring rain. In fact I quite enjoy it."

"I detest rain more than anything."

Her smile does not fade at my savage tone. I wish it would. I would feel more pacified if I could for once chase

that maddening grin away. Her cow-like eyes retain their fatuous expression, despite the glare with which I meet them.

“You are shopping?”

“Yes.”

“Going to West, the stationer?”

“Yes.”

As I have *met* her on my way there. I conclude she will take the opposite course.

I am mistaken.

“I’ll come with you, I want a little chat, and I really quite enjoy the rain—I——”

“I have forgotten my purse.” I plunge my hand irately into my pocket. “I find I must go back.”

“Let me——”

“No, thank you. I really must go back. Good-bye.”

So I rid myself of her. Poor soul!

As innocent a soul as ever lived upon the earth, I doubt not. May it live again, in a less provoking guise, where the good are appreciated !

CHAPTER VII.

DURING the ensuing week the cloud seems to disperse. I can no longer discern it; perhaps my sun shines too radiantly. For the sun of my life is Maggie, and never has she been more absolutely gay and happy—yes, happy. It is impossible to misread the steady light in her eyes, the half-smile that clings to her mouth. Her life is yielding her rich harvest, poor as it appears. Sweetnesses, unseen by my watchful eye, are falling on her; blessings for which, though I mark them not, I thank heaven each night, lowly on my bended knees.

Let clouds, and darkness, and all evil

potents find out other skies than ours ; as for us, we can defy them—more, we can ignore them !

Once, only once, a hint of sadness falls on her ; once, only once, does a shadow pass quickly across my sun.

She had just come back from Fairthorne, and I, standing at the window as it grew dusk, caught sight of Dr. George passing down the street with a grave face.

“Who would be in love,” I said. “There goes your latest, Maggie, looking like a mute.”

“Don’t joke about it,” she said, her voice changing. “It—it is no joking matter.”

I turned, and to me it seemed that her face grew pale, that her eyes were full of tears. I could not see her well.

“No, love is no joking matter,” I agreed soberly.

For a few moments she remained silent, standing by the piano; then, as I seated myself, she came to me and knelt beside me, taking my hands in hers.

"Nina," she said—I could hear her hurried breathing, and there *were* tears in her eyes, they overflowed as she spoke—"I think love is more terrible than death, it *frightens* me. . . ."

"Maggie!" I said rallying.

"It *frightens* me."

Her attitude and words recalled to me the time when, as a child, she grew nervous in the dark, and sought me for comfort and company.

"Love is not only terrible," I went on, much in the same strain as I had preached to her childish terror, "it is also beautiful, the most beautiful feeling in the world."

"It is like death, it cannot change, it has no pity——"

“But it has joy, it *is* joy; and if it cannot change——”

“Cannot change, cannot change,” she muttered.

“If it cannot change, then it wins joy, its own joy from the deepest misery.”

She lifted her head; her eyes shone like the dazzle of sunlight on water, to her cheeks the colour flew back in a burning blush.

“From the deepest, deepest misery it wins its own joy. . . . Nina, you have spoken the truth.”

So the cloud passed—the shadow of a cloud—and my comfort availed to soothe my pearl, as in the old days. The thought contented me.

It is really hot to-day, Saturday, the third of May. Spring visits us early this year; hereafter we shall doubtless pay for the premature pleasure. But the present

is sweet ; yes, the present is even sweet. I have repented me of my angry resolve to gather no flowers for our mother's grave ; I have forgiven Maggie for spending her holiday at Fairthorne ; and am looking forward to the morrow when we shall be together all day.

I change my dingy merino dress for a light cotton, don my straw hat, and, as the church clock strikes two, pass leisurely out into the sunny street. I hesitate for a moment which direction I shall take, then I turn down the street and wend my way slowly towards Fairthorne.

It lies nearly a mile beyond the town, and it is reached by the high road to a neighbouring sea-port. It is a well-wooded estate, surrounded by pretty park lands. One can catch but a glimpse of the house from the road. Before I reach the

entrance gate, I turn aside up a retired lane, a lane which leads to another lane; and along lane number two I wander, forgetting time and distance. The hawthorn hedges are just beginning to show white. By the wayside primroses cluster. I pick some of them, and place them in the basket I have brought. I arrive at Meadowsweet Farm at length—a farmhouse nestling among billowy fields and wooded hills. I have been here once or twice before—it was from this idyllic-looking settlement our mother obtained the milk that supported her strength in her last illness. I know the place. I know, therefore, the wooded slope beyond, carpeted with primroses. Over a stile, through a meadow—destitute of cattle, thank Heaven!—over a wooden bridge spanning what the old poets call a “purling brook,” through another pasture land,

at the further end of which a cow is feeding, I creep at length under a wooden railing into the copse. The cream of the earth has risen to the surface here at any rate; it remains for my hands to skim the richness. But for awhile I must rest. I am hot and tired. I climb to the top of the slope, and close under the hedge I lie down among the primroses and straggling grasses and bits of broken twigs, taking my hat off and pillowing my head upon my clasped hands.

“It is good to be here,” I say to myself, as I gaze up between the tops of the waving larches to the deep blue sky; very deeply blue it shows against the delicate vivid green of the new foliage. It is as though Summer has stretched her hand over the land, saying, “I am coming.” Everything seems to be waiting for her, listening for her. The gently

stirring larches seem to tell each other of her approach ; the stream yonder talks of her, her breath is in the air, her promise is in my heart, else why does it beat with so strong and hopeful a pulse ?

“Is there joy still in the world ?” I say to myself, watching with vague eyes the rocking tree tops, as a soothed child watches its mother’s hand upon the swaying cradle. “Is there still joy, and is there still strength in my heart to welcome it ? I do not feel old. My girlhood has passed, yet I am still young and strong.”

Then I fall to thinking of our dead mother. Oh, to welcome back to this earth again her whose loss has robbed my life of gladness. . . .

“What would I give ?” I ask the primroses, “what would I give to see

her standing by my side just now, in this fresh spring-tide, when all things rejoice? ”

Tears cloud my eyes. The breath of the primroses is like the sympathy she never withheld ; their dumbness like that which sealed her dear lips nine years ago. I begin to doze ; there is a peace upon my restless heart very strange to it. Between waking and sleeping, between the blue of the sky and the tender misty green of the budding earth, a spirit seems to float, to approach, to whisper this inquiry : “ *Of the two you have lost, your two most dear, which of them, your mother or your lover, do you most long to see again ?* ”

I start awake, I rub my eyes, I am all confused. Still I seem to hear a voice in my heart asking, “ *Which of the two, which of the two ?* ”

I turn as I lie upon the earth, and hide my face on her bosom.

Hey, but the sap is high in the trees, and I am young, I am young! My defrauded youth cries aloud for its rights. And he is of the spring—my one lover—its blue is in his eye, its strength in his manhood, and oh! its sweetness in his voice. . . . I cannot think of him as dead, or changed.

But my mother.

I rise, the passion of the season in my blood—rise, and fling my arms about the rough body of a larch, and, pressing my pallid cheek against it, stammer out to my heart the truth.

“I want to see him again—him most of all—before all. . . . Here, in the merry spring time, among the flowers, it would be such a natural, such a jocund thing to meet him again.”

Sighing, I lift my numbed cheek from the tree's harsh trunk, and, looking across the hawthorn hedge just bursting into bloom, I—*have my desire.*

The ground on the other side is broken by ancient brick-kilns, from which the treasure has long since been dug. There is a pathway across this rugged field, and by this path there grows an early flowering pink thorn, the only pretty thing in the field—not now, though, not now, while Maggie stands beside it blushing—I think she is blushing. She is turning somewhat from me. I can see his face well enough. . . . “I knew he was not dead, I knew he was not dead,” I keep repeating to myself in an insanely exultant way. Not dead. Only changed. . . . His moustache is longer; it is just the colour of Maggie's hair. I never noticed—I mean, remembered—that

before. Just the same golden hue, as the sun shines upon them both. . . . His cheek is thinner; he looks older—not much. His figure is the same, and his eyes—as he watches Maggie trying to pick a spray of the pink thorn—it is a little too high for her—I remember that look in them. . . . I could hear his voice from where I stand—I wish he would speak. . . . Thirteen years, thirteen years! I cannot take my eyes from him. . . .

Maggie succeeds in picking the spray; I hear the tiny snap of the branch as it breaks. She gives a little laugh. At the same instant he flings his arms about her. . . . Out in the dizzy sunshine, there appears to be but one figure beside the blushing hawthorn bush.

I steal away, like one burdened with a secret crime. Crouchingly, coweringly

I creep between the larches down the flowery slope. I am in haste to leave the wood where I have dreamed so evil a dream.

At length, I find myself upon the high-road. The twilight is settling down over the land. The evening star comes out, and watches me.

“Mother,” I say whisperingly, as I return its calm gaze with one hardly less calm, “you are avenged.”

CHAPTER VIII.

It is past eight when Maggie enters our sitting-room. I am not painting. I have my Sunday dress across my knees, and I am mending a rent therein. It is but a small tear, but my fingers are awkward with a needle—slow and awkward. I have been blundering over it very nearly an hour. Maggie has a pink cotton dress on. I noticed that—this morning. A pink cotton dress, and in her hand she carries a hawthorn spray of the same colour. A light shawl drops from her shoulders as she stands regarding me. It is an unfamiliar shawl. I look at it, not

at her. I feel an unreasoning hatred
rising in my heart against that shawl.

“I—I——”

It is a new thing to hear Maggie stammer. I look at her perforce. She is as pink as her gown, pink all over her face ; and her eyes—they do not look at me, they are fastened on the pink bough in her hand.

“Nina. . . .”

“Yes.”

“I—I have got back.”

“So I see.”

“This shawl——” My eyes have returned to it. “Was—they—I mean—lent to me.”

“Ah.”

“They—thought I might feel cold. . . . I am late. Have you been — been anxious?”

“Oh dear, no. After all, you are

only an hour later than last Saturday; and I remembered the walk you were to take—a long walk, I understood? Did the children enjoy it?”

“I—believe so.”

I push my work away from me, right off my knee, and lifting my arms and yawning, I look at her. My bonnie, bonnie pearl! Never has she looked more lovely than at this moment. Some shame seems to dwell upon and soften all the lines of her tall figure. It weighs also upon her eyelids; they droop heavily as she forces herself to meet my gaze. The varying colour in her face, the inclined brow, the mouth trembling slightly, the conscious play of her hands—all betray the same abashment. Her loveliness, thus stirred and intensified by feeling, is dreadful to me. It is as though the sweetest voice in Heaven's choir said to me, “There is no God.”

There is no truth in beauty, there is no truth in love. It is an over bitter sermon that your radiancy preaches, my pearl, from an over bitter text.

She begins to laugh, not her laugh, a nervous laugh akin to tears.

“How you look at me, Nina!”

“Do I? I was—I am thinking how pretty you are. Beauty is truth, the poets say, and truth is beauty.”

She seats herself on the music-stool, and leans her arm upon the covered keyboard. Her face is in shadow so. To-night she is in no hurry to take off her hat.

“What a lovely day it has been,” I continue, “not a cloud in the sky, not a single cloud! On such a day, beneath such a sky, it is hard to believe in wrong or trouble. Life is pleasant sometimes even to the saddest. I—I was almost happy this afternoon, Maggie.”

"Poor Nina!"

"Ay, poor Nina, indeed. . . . But *it* was something even to come *near*, as it were in reach of, happiness."

There is no response. Maggie is smelling her hawthorn spray.

"I am too old," I recommence, "too old, too old. Happiness is not for such as I. It was only because of the day, the sunny day, I dreamed—— By-the-bye, Maggie, I took a long walk this afternoon, almost as long as yours, all the way to Meadowsweet Farm."

She starts at the name. The piano treacherously responds to her sudden movement with a low moan.

"A long way, wasn't it, for such a lazy-bones? I went to gather some flowers for mother's grave, and in the wood——"

"Are those the flowers?" she interrupts, making her way hastily to the

window, and taking my basket off the table.

“ Why, Nina, there are only a few half-dead primroses in it ; there—— ”

“ As I was saying, in the wood, the larch-wood, I fell asleep and dreamed, or saw a vision—— ” I stop abruptly.

No. I will not force her confidence. It has always been as freely given as the daylight. I will wait for the dawn, be it never so tardy.

“ A vision ? ”

I do not look at her. I regather my work to my lap, and search diligently for the half-mended rent in which my needle is sticking.

“ A vision ? Nina, you are—— ”

“ Joking, of course. I mean I fell asleep, because I was tired out, and so—— so I had no time to pick any flowers.”

She lays down the basket and, bringing

a footstool to my side, she seats herself upon it.

"Why don't you take off your hat?" I ask, keeping my eyes upon my work.

"Haven't I? I—I was thinking how absurd it was you should have walked to Meadowsweet Farm, this especial afternoon, for I—we, I mean—walked there too."

"Ah."

"Quite a different way to the one you went, of course. We went across the country from Fairthorne; we never once trod the road—any road. I have never been that way before. It was very nice."

"Ah."

"The children" (how her bright head glints in the gaslight, though my eyes are on my needle it quite dazzles me!) "went down to the farm to get a drink of milk they were in raptures over it."

“And you?”

“I? Oh no, I didn’t. I—I was picking some May. Do you know, there is such a lovely pink thorn in the field above the wood? Oh, it is *so* lovely! Didn’t you see it? You might——”

“I told you I saw a vision.”

“Ah, you were asleep; and besides, I don’t fancy you could see it from the wood.”

“Perhaps not. And so you enjoyed yourself, on the whole?”

I have finished my mending, and am folding up my dress.

“Yes . . .”

Her “yes” speaks volumes, absently as she utters the monosyllable. It is the most eloquent word I have ever heard from her lips; and how eloquent her dreamy eyes, her slow smile!

“It is well, it is well; but how about

the mother's grave? It is a small matter, a small matter indeed; yet to-morrow will be the first birthday it has gone without flowers—all undecked, poor little mother!"

I am examining the dead primroses at the bottom of the basket. I take the sweet limp things gently in my hands and regard them pityingly. I lift them to my face and inhale their scent lingeringly; it is the last sweetness they will ever yield to mortal.

"Don't vex yourself, Nina; there is this branch of pink thorn. I picked it on purpose. It is a pretty piece; I will put it in water."

I replace the dead flowers one by one in the basket; they are shaking in my grasp. Hard, hard I struggle to command myself.

I keep the last little dead flower in my hand; the touch of its soft dying petals

holds back the rage that is stirring and rising, rising in me like a tide.

“Look at it, is it not pretty?”

I look at it, and at her. She smiles. The scent of the May is sickening.

The dead flower drops from my hand, trembling no longer. In a second I have snatched the hawthorn branch from Maggie and trampled on it, literally *ground* it under my feet. The thorns run into them. I do not feel the pain, or only in the half conscious way a delirious person might.

Suddenly I come to myself. There is less of that accursed *pinkness* in the room than there was. I have crushed the colour from the May blossoms, and I have scared it, every atom of it, from Maggie's face.

“I,” I begin, panting still, “I couldn't bear it—the thought of it. How could

you dream of putting—putting
a thing on mother's grave?"

"What is the matter with it?"
asks in a voice so low I can only
catch the words.

"I beg your pardon—for bein,
rude," I say, retrieving my calm
"What is the matter with it?
Maggie, how could we deck *her* grave
so—so *paltry* a bloom? It would
like—*an excuse*."

•

CHAPTER IX.

It is Sunday evening. I am sitting by our mother's grave, alone. Maggie and I are not good company to each other to-day. We have been to church together, we have breakfasted and dined together, we have talked, as people talk to each other when they have been acquainted for about three days.

It is no longer a cloud, a shadow, a feeling that has come between us. Alas ! it is a something real enough, with a name I dare not breathe, even to myself. Never again, never again, I repeat with a despair I have not measured, can we

be the same as we have been to e other.

I sit by our mother's undec grave alone, and it is evening. evening of as warm and bright a da yesterday. From this churchyard, hushed and so sunny, there is a lo view. It lies above the town, whose brick houses appear of a soft rosy t whose smoke a grey mist, whose wind the gleaming of diamonds, from the q place where mother has slept for 1 years. I can see the dark woods the green pasture lands of Fairtho and, beyond, the gleam of the bay the chimneys of the sea-port, six mile road from F——. The sun strikes the w just now. My eyes fasten themselves u the shining streak. I have made up mind that it is at this sea-port, my— Coulter, probably Captain Coulter n

is stationed. There are always two regiments located there. I have heard of changes being effected lately in these forces; and though neither of the regiments recently arrived is the one to which he belonged thirteen years ago, what more likely than that he has exchanged since then. And, reasoning thus, why should I doubt he is at present quartered at Chalk Bay; why should I doubt it? I do not doubt it. The whole thing is perfectly clear to my mind. What more natural than that he should be acquainted with Mr. La Touche, and be invited by the latter to lunch, and there see, and naturally, oh, very naturally, fall in love, with his friend's pretty governess? Surely, surely she is lovely enough to excuse a worse offence than this—this breach of a romantic woman's notion of constancy!

"I could forgive all this," I say to myself as I let my hand fall wearily upon the stone slab that covers our little mother and keeps her so still and silent. "I could put by this pain, this notion gladly, yes, even gladly, if Maggie was still *my* Maggie, if only, only, only I could keep my pearl unspotted; but she has *deceived* me. That she has taken my lover's love is not enough—she does the wrong *secretly*. He and she, they are afraid of me. . . . I am wounded to the death," I cry to my mother, laying my cheek upon the sun-warmed stone, in grief as heavy as when I first visited this her grave; "I cannot forgive her. My little mother, thou art dumb; thou dost not plead for her as thou didst before thou left us. Then, indeed, thy words were binding: 'If she fall sick, or do wrong, never leave her; be her friend through all.'

"Not so easy, little mother. It was a cruel promise to wring from any mortal. I have come here to tell you I must break it, mother. I have only human strength."

There comes no contradiction from below.

"I want to come and lie beside you——"

"*What, and leave little sister?*" the dear voice seems to say, as it said to me long since, in answer to my prayer that I might go with her.

"She is not 'little sister' now, darling. She is tall and grand and beautiful—so beautiful that all men bow unto her. She has every good gift—love and loveliness and youth—and somehow, oh, little mother, let me whisper it, for it is a bitter thing, I have *earned her distrust*."

"I am very poor. My youth is gone.

I never had any beauty; and now the love—the love, the only love that I could be sure of, is tainted. Ah! I fear that is no true love that can deceive, no true love. She has taken my faith, too. I *trusted* her, as I have trusted thee; and now . . . I am wounded unto death. I would I might creep in beside thee, little mother, and rest . . .”

“Nina, why Nina, my child!”

I raise my head. I know the voice. I regard Dr. Bland through a mist of tears.

“It—it is mother’s birthday.”

“Well, little woman, is that any reason why you should weep so bitterly?”

“I have no flowers—no flowers for her grave. We always deck it on her birthday. This is the first, the first——”

I feel his hand upon my miserable bowed head, stroking my rough short hair.

“Poor child! I would not blame thy constant heart, such loyalty is rare—too rare; but, Nina, mother is happy this many a year.”

I rise. I put aside his comfort. I struggle for a voice to tell him he is mistaken.

“I am not crying for—her.”

It seems to me as if I never have hated falsehood enough, until to-day—until yesterday.

“I am sorry—I am crying for *myself*.”
I feel my face working.

“Yourself!” he repeats in a tone of concern.

“Yes, myself. I told you I was selfish. I always think of myself.” I hold out my hand for my hat, which he has picked up.

“Won’t you tell me——”

“No,” I interrupt a little wildly, “I cannot tell any one except the mother.

I never could tell things to any
and I cannot now."

I turn from him, and sinking
the tomb again I lay my arms
upon it, as if indeed I listened to
whispering counsel to me from below.

He goes away, and darkness comes
apace.

Is there, then, healing in thy woe
night? Surely, yes. Softly
land thou comest in thy trailing
and blottest out the sights that
and hidest the tears that are
of men. All hail, to thee! I have
for thee. Now, at last, my wound
is healed. Now, at last, I can look
greet the stars, those heavenly
are always full of tears to tell
weep. . . . And in the night
live again, and thou, my mother,
longer dumb.

t in despair, with a wound, deep as
, alas! but bound, and staunched
while, I retrace my steps. I leave
e night dews and the night silence
ittle mother from whom I have
red strength.

CHAPTER X.

AND of that strength I find great need. Sometimes during the next few days I think that Maggie is on the verge of a confession. Once she began to talk of my old lover—she actually mentioned his name; then of Fairthorne; then, to my chagrin, of the owner of Fairthorne—Mr. La Touche is very kind, she says—She tells me he has asked her all about me. I answer her shortly when she turns aside thus from *the* subject.

Still I think she has *tried* to tell me. I have seen her face flush, and her eyes grow shy; and then when we begin to talk and I am prepared—ah, how I have

owned the words I would say to her, words I think most likely to set her at her ease, and put all regret and pain from her—when I am prepared, I repeat, to meet her half-way—she—she sheers off; he begins to talk of other things, of, most often, the owner of Fairthorne or the Baroness. She cannot, *cannot* bring herself to tell me that my old lover is her new one.

Oh, Maggie, if you only knew how ready I am to welcome him as such, to be glad for you both! How I have fought, and conquered utterly my jealousy. How I have put away the old dream, as a man not yet tired of life pushes the poison draught from him, out of sight and reach. . . .

To no purpose, it seems, have I so fought and triumphed. Maggie denies me the sweets of victory. It is hard, it is

horribly hard ; and between us the gulf widens—widens.

A month passes in this miserable fashion. A summer of unwonted heat and dryness is upon us ; the trees are in leaf, unsoiled and vivid of hue ; the grass is long in the hay-fields, and some of it is in seed. The purple wave of colour grows each day deeper across the undulating meadows. The hawthorn blossom has faded to a sickly brown, the primroses are past, the anemones, the hyacinths. In their stead the wild rose studs the hedgerows—mostly out of reach—to make more fair its fairness, which is exquisite, to make more rare its exceeding delicacy of pink or white, which is unrivalled. The elder is in bloom, and the horse chestnut flowers are falling. We cannot have all our sweets at once, it seems. Everything in its

ason, and this is the "time of roses,"
and of strawberries.

At the close of one hot day, Maggie comes back from Fairthorne with her old diancy burning over her face, which has changed significantly; and amid this change, and lighting it defiantly, there beams this unconquerable joy—this old sadness. I am taking my summer holiday, and painting on my own account for month or two, as is my wont. I am touching up a sketch I made to-day when she enters. She lays a couple of fragrant roses by my hand, and throws herself into a low chair by my table. I lift my eyes and fix them, not on the roses, but on her face, and cannot take them from it. All the old radiance is there; yes, but changed as the sunlight changes when it shifts, instead of a tranquil sea, waters full of storm and motion.

"The Baroness has asked me to dine to-night," she says.

"To dine?"

"Yes. Astonishing, isn't it? The fact is, they have one or two people coming, and not enough ladies, so they asked me to make up the right number."

"I thought the Baroness was infirm—paralyzed?"

"So she is. She is wheeled in on a chair made on purpose. She is such a lively old lady, awfully game, you know."

"She must be."

"Talks away like fun to men, and really enjoys their society. I believe she—why don't you look at your roses, Nina?"

Thus reminded, I take them up and smell them absently.

"Lovely! Gloire de Dijon, aren't they?"

Yes. Guess who sent them to you.”
What would I not give to prevent the
of blood that, rising with one
antic throb from my heart, suffuses
face with crimson?

There is no need to blush, Nina,”
Maggie with a half laugh. “They
not from your old lover, only from
La Touche.”

forcing myself to look at her, I see my
h reflected on her face, and her eyes
drooping guiltily.

He takes a great interest in you,” she
s on nervously, evidently for the sake
alking. “I have told him all about
r painting, and he has made me
ribe you, even to your short hair.
says you may have anything you like,
he way of flowers for your painting,
; his garden will afford.”

How kind of him.”

The flush has long ago faded from my cheeks; on hers it seems to grow brighter.

“He *is* kind.”

“Don’t you think,” I say wearily, “that you had better be looking out a dress to wear this evening.”

“I have thought of one—my white muslin. I have only worn it once, and Mr. La Touche——”

“Bother Mr. La Touche!” I exclaim crossly. She stares at me for a moment, and then laughs good-humouredly.

“Have you heard enough of him? Well, I must go and dress, as I have promised to go and kiss my little pupils in bed, which ceremony entails an early start on my part. I must be there at half-past seven. They dine at eight.”

“How those children seem to dote on

ou! By-the-by, how are you going?
ou cannot go alone, on foot."

"The Ryans have promised to call for
me. They are dining at Fairthorne, too,
his evening."

"Ah! And is Miss Ryan going?"

"Yes."

"*What* a foil she'll make for you."

She laughs carelessly for answer, and
aves me to my thoughts. I push my
etch from me, and let my head sink
spondingly upon my arms. How long
remain thus I do not know; the first
ing I feel consciously is the touch of
ol, soft hands, the pressure, grown so
range, of Maggie's embrace. She kneels
own beside me, "dressed in her
uslin dress." Nothing could look purer,
thing gentler, nothing sweeter. All
ite, all white, no stain anywhere—and
t——"

"Nina," she almost whispers, "I cannot bear to see you so out of spirits as you have been of late."

"Cannot you?"

"You are so changed. I don't know what ails you?"

"Don't you?"

There is a pause. I am looking down on her bright head with a yearning, the bitter strength of which God only knows!

"You will crush your dress," I say coldly.

"I—I don't care. Nina, I want to tell you something. I have wanted to tell you something for a long time."

She lifts her beautiful face. No deceit could long abide there; no treason find a home in those pure eyes! I was sure of it, sure of it! I put my arm about her. I bend over her until my eyes are hidden

in her hair. She cannot fancy they reproach her so.

"Tell me, my heart," I say softly, "tell me what you list. Who—who in all the world will you love truly, if not Nina?"

There is silence for a space. I can hear her heart-beats quickening.

"If—if—one stole something, Nina?"

"Yes."

"If you knew I were dishonest—*dishonest*, could you love me still?"

I cannot speak. I can only press my lips upon her bonny head.

"Would you believe me, if I were tell you I was *wicked*?"

"No——" I begin, and I try to clasp her closer, but suddenly she breaks from me.

"I cannot tell you—you of all people. I cannot, I cannot!"

I rise as she rises. We stand staring at one another.

"You make me quite as morbid as yourself," she says, nervously stooping to smooth out the wrinkles she has made in her flounce.

"What did you want to tell me?"

"Oh, a wonderful secret—a great secret!" she laughs, her whole manner changed. "Shall I whisper it, or can you guess it, you sapient Nina?"

Still holding her flounce, she dances up to me, and pretending to whisper in my ear, she sings to the tune of Figaro's serenade—

"I have a lover—which is something quite new to you. Come, Nina, I must be off. Addio."

"Stay!" I cry hastily. "Put these roses in your band."

I snatch them off the table. I want

excuse to detain her. I want to give all the help I can, against herself.

‘What! *your* roses?’

‘I—what do I care for them!’ I cry isively, as with trembling fingers I try to fasten them in her dress.

‘Do you know what men they are going to have to dine?’ I continue hurriedly.

‘Some officers from Chalk Bay. Some of the new regiment. There’s the cab—oh, it is stopping. I mustn’t keep them waiting—I——’

‘Wait one moment?’

‘My cloak is in the hall. There’s the door!’

She has her hand on the door-handle, but I am too quick for her. I place myself against it and lay my hand upon her arm.

“Answer me one thing, one thing

before you go: Do you know any of these officers ? ”


“ I ? No, how should I ? ”

And so she goes from me with a lie upon her lips. Those lips, that, of all pure lips in the world, I would, one month ago, have named the purest. . . . My pearl, my pearl, into what muddy waters hast thou sunk ? And yet she *tries* to rise—she *tries* so hard—so vainly. The waters, the foul dark waters of deceit are too strong in their turbid current—too strong. . . .

I forget my supper. I pace the room in a tempest of despair and indignation. I begin to picture what goes on at Fairthorne. How the dinner time is passing. How the diners are comporting themselves. How plainly I can see *her* in my mind's eye. Clad in white, a child-faced girl, with brown eyes, and yellow hair ;

and smiling that sweet, pleased smile,— smiling more sweetly still when he, who perhaps sits beside her, turns on her his loving glance. They are glad, perhaps, his kind Baroness and her husband, to watch this promising love affair. They wish their children's governess well ; they wish well also the soldierly handsome man who is her lover.

After a while these imaginative musings begin to pall. My restlessness creases. I, as well as my best beloved, can play a mean part. I find myself with my out-door things on, stealing out of the house like a thief. Like a thief I proceed on my way through the pure moonlight—faint as yet, for the moon is only rising. Like a thief I find my way to Fairthorne, creep up its broad avenue, turn aside as the lights within the building dash upon me, and slink into a path



between the shrubs ; and so, with many a halt and hiding, I make the entire tour of the house, and pause in the flower-garden, cowering behind a laurustinus bush. From behind this covert I can see the drawing-room windows—French windows, and standing open to the sultry night. I can mark also the figures within the room. A puerile thought occupies me for the moment, a longing desire, as imbecile as strong, to see my one-time lover in evening dress. I used to like him in it. I want to see if it becomes him as bravely now. I see a stout lady lying in state upon a couch, at the further end of the room, which is brilliantly lighted. I suppose her to be the Baroness. She is of a very dark complexion ; she has white hair. She is knitting and talking rapidly to Miss Ryan, who sits beside her. She has a large mouth, and small black eyes.

She is richly dressed in some shining yellow stuff. Two young ladies, sisters evidently, for they are dressed alike, are seated by a table, and are looking over a book together—a book of prints. Probably, visitors at Fairthorne. I can just see the back of an elderly lady, clad in grey. She is bending forwards, talking, I presume, to Maggie. Maggie is the only lady in the apartment I cannot catch a glimpse of. Yet how do I know? there may be yet another behind her again, for the room is a large one, and there are windows to the side which I cannot see. Apparently the gentlemen have not left their wine. I can see the drawing-room door from my lurking place; on it I fix my eyes. The roses—I can see their red and white, pink, and yellow faces but dimly—are sending forth a most delicious odour. I have heard

that Fairthorne has a rose-garden. I must be in it now, I fancy. I smell nothing but roses—standards, most of them, as far as I can see. There are some borders full of plants and bushes, roses also, by the scent.

The drawing-room door opens. First the Rev. Ryan appears. He is a portly and aged masculine likeness of his eldest daughter. Next, a man with long moustaches and Mr. Williams; then the one I look for, and two very young men. Thirteen years, then, are but as a dream to those who can remember. I take but one look, and immediately hide myself, as if it were myself he seeks with those ardent eyes.

“Thirteen years!” I keep repeating to myself behind the bush. “Thirteen years!” It is hard to believe it; it is hard to still the mad flutter of my pulses with

any such words. When, on recovering my senseless agitation, I again peep from my shelter, he is not to be seen. Of course he is not to be seen, for neither is Maggie visible, and by whose side should he linger if not by hers? Hark! the silvery tones of a piano glide out to me, giving to this fragrant garden, this most exquisite June night, the only sweetness lacking. Spell-bound I listen until the air, that the prelude has prepared me for, begins, and with it, or rather singing it, the voice of my dreams. . . .

I fancy I recognize Maggie's touch in the accompaniment. She is determined to have the whole play of thirteen years ago over again. She will not leave out the smallest details. She has taken the place of the old actress, and that is all the difference. It is clear to me now where she heard that serenade, and whose

the voice which sang it. She had caught the expression of the voice, and *that* in her careless humming of the air was what so startled me.

*"Nina crudel, Nina crudel, il tuo fedel si strugge di
desir !
Nina crudel . . . mi vuoi veder morir."*

A hand gently and cautiously grasps my arm from behind, and so interrupts my listening. I do not cry out. It has never been an instinct of mine to do so when alarmed.

"Don't be frightened, it is only I."
So my molester endeavours to reassure me.

"You ! What are you doing here ?"

"Much the same as you—*spying*."

"But, Dr. George !"

"Hush ! let us listen to the song.
Sings sweetly, doesn't he ?"

I glance at his face, ghastly in the

moonlight, at the hard, haughty features, at the dark eyes whose tenour the night hides, and am silent.

The voice pauses for a few bars.

“If I had my hand upon his throat, he would never sing again,” mutters my co-spy.

“Dr. George!”

“And yet I love him. I swear he actually found a place in my heart, three months ago. He has a winning way with him. Hush!”

The voice recommences. It has gained in sweetness since I last heard it. How badly Maggie plays the accompaniment. Her hands are trembling, perhaps. The old story—the old story.

We listen intently until the last vibration of the singer's voice has died away, until the fingers on the piano keys have faltered over their last note.

Dr. George has never taken his
off the lighted drawing-room, the window
open to the night.

Suddenly, with a cruel force, he grips
my arm.

“Look ! ” he whispers.

Framed in the casement they stand
a moment, the two for whom we wait
then slowly they step out into the moon-
light, strong and clear now. They look
towards us. Dr. George’s hand upon my
arm tightens.

They turn to each other. The moon-
light falls full on Maggie’s face, and
lifts it to him, and sublimates it.

“ *My darling.* ”

So the two words come to us in
most passionate of love-whispers. And
they saunter on slowly, not in our direc-
tion, but along the walk that
parallel with the house. Slowly, slowly,

they move side by side, until they are lost in the shadowy domain beyond. . . .

“Listen!” says a voice in my ear.
“If ever he does her wrong *I will kill him*. I have sworn it. Take the vow home to comfort you.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE next morning my right arm refuses to perform its customary function of pouring out the tea. Twice I essay to lift the teapot, and twice I am fain to let it return to its place with a bump that endangers its contents.

"You must do it, Maggie," I say; "my right hand has lost its cunning."

"Right *arm*, I should say. What can ail it?" asks Maggie concernedly, as she takes my place.

"Rheumatism, I dare say," reply I mendaciously.

"Turn up your sleeve and let us have

ook at it," she suggests, coming to my
e.

But this I refuse to do, knowing full
all that on the white flesh, between the
bow and the shoulder, there is the mark of
Dr. George's cruel grip, in black and red.

"It will be well to-morrow; there is no
need to make a fuss. It is a very good
thing I am not making up my cards to
send to town."

"Don't you think," says Maggie, still
uneasy, "you ought to get Dr. Bland's
opinion on it?"

I laugh.

"Or Dr. George's; perhaps he would
know more about it."

"Or Dr. George's," she repeats
seriously. "He is cleverer than his
father, they say. I met him yesterday
afternoon when I was coming from
Fairthorne."

"Did you stop? did you speak?"

"Yes; we had quite a chat."

Maggie has reseated herself, and is pouring out our tea. She has her pink cotton dress on to-day. She is looking rather pale.

"Did you tell him you were going to dine at Fairthorne that evening?"

"Yes; oh, yes. But don't you think you ought to show him your arm, Nina?"

The question tickles me so, I have to put down the cup I am in the act of lifting to my lips with my left hand.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Dr. George. . . ."

"Nonsense, Nina. There is nothing to laugh at in him."

"Perhaps not; but, as you say, he would know all about my arm, and would probably laugh at it."

"He does not often laugh."

"How did you enjoy yourself last night, you have not told me?"

"How can I tell you?" she says dreamily, sipping her tea.

"Who was there?"

"Let me see. Some people of the name of Boyd, staying in the house, mother and two daughters. They came the day before yesterday, I believe, but I did not see them till last night. I like Mrs. Boyd. Then there were three officers from Chalk Bay, Mr. Williams, the Rev. Ryan—five gentlemen; and myself, the three Boyds, and Miss Ryan made up the five ladies. It was very pleasant."

"You look tired."

She has finished her breakfast and is standing at the open window. It is a hot, close, sunless morning.

"I wish there was a little air," she

says. "This weather is enough to tire any one. Are you going out to-day, Nina?"

"I don't know," I answer languidly. I have not yet completed my repast. The loss of my good right hand impedes its progress.

"But *I* do," she replies roguishly. "I can safely assert that Miss Delaine will take the air this afternoon between three and six."

"Why?"

"Why? Because Miss Ryan has intimated her intention of making a call upon the said Miss Delaine between those hours."

"Really. Oh, Maggie!"

"Really; and do you know, I did not discourage her scheme, because I said to myself, it will make Nina go out. Now about this arm?"

I have joined her at the window to try and get a breath of air. There is none to be had for love or money to-day. Not one fine hair of Maggie's stirs, not one of those golden gossamer threads that curl and wave about her forehead and neck.

"This arm!" I repeat contemptuously. "It will be well in a day or two. I can tell it is nothing."

"Are you sure?"

Oh, bless thy loving eyes, my sister—ring still, as they turn upon me their licituous glances.

"Quite sure. What would I not give to think everything else that pains me would as soon be well!"

She leaves me then to prepare for her daily journey to Fairthorne—leaves me without a word, but I hear her sigh.

Miss Ryan's pending visit sends me

forth early in the afternoon. I am tired from my walk last night. I have nowhere to go. I toil up High Street, hot and sunless to my mind as Gehenna. Without taking much heed where my steps tend, I find myself by my mother's grave. I have visited this grave very frequently lately. Is it the ghost of the old feeling that so leads me, the feeling that when trouble was near brought me ever to my mother's side in the years gone by?

I do not speak to her to-day, I lean upon her grave and fall asleep.

I am aroused by the tramping of feet. Looking up, I see a funeral enter the churchyard. It is only a walking funeral. This fact argues that no imposing headstone will rear itself presently, no paragraph in any daily paper will be edged with black. But does it likewise argue

that no heart will break, no ears hearken, ever hearken yearningly for the "voice that is still" ?

The curate officiating is Mr. Williams. I half laugh at him as he stands, with his red-haired head bare and his boyish face downcast, reading in his shy voice the solemn service of the dead.

Then I forget all about the funeral, having enough to do thinking my own sad thoughts.

The bearers, mourners, sympathetic friends and stragglers pass out in a little while, leaving the dead all alone to sleep his first slumber under the heavily piled earth. I do not look at them. I can see the new made grave from where I rest, my eyes are fixed on it. The bell has done its tolling. The ringer has gone home to tea. The mourner—that man or woman can hope for more than

one *real* mourner?—is wiping her eyes and receiving consolation. But the dead, the one who is left alone, all alone *in* his strange bed for the first time, *all alone*. . . .

I leave my mother's resting-place—she is well at home by now—and seek out this stranger's mound, this new heap of earth, and stand by it just *for company's sake*, that he may not feel quite alone all at once.

"He was a good man," says the curate's voice beside me, "a good man, and fought a good fight. He had been in a consumption for nine years, with seven children and a wife depending on him. They are mostly out at service now, and his wife is washer-woman at Fairthorne."

"How lonely he must feel—here."

"Here! if he *were* here; but, my dear Miss Delaine, you forget, he is not here, for, as his Saviour rose, so has he risen."

"Did he believe this?"

"Certainly. He had no fear—rather, great peace."

I look up at the misty grey sky quivering with heat, and sigh a long gasping sigh. Then I turn from him who has lately fallen asleep, for it seems vain indeed to think my presence can comfort him, and wander disconsolately down the path, the curate at my side. He wears a ~~crape~~ scarf round his hat. It flaps every now and then across his round red cheek.

"How glad I am I have met you. I particularly wanted to speak to you," says Mr. Williams diffidently.

"To me?"

"Yes. I—I know, I feel I ought to—unwilling as I am, hard as it is."

"What on earth about?"

I have come to a stand-still, and am staring at the black scarf which has

kindly flapped across the curate's perturbed face.

"About, that is to say, about what concerns Miss Maggie."

"Jealousy again," I say to myself. "Maggie's new lover is making a fine commotion."

I walk on again in silence. I am determined not to help him, for I am sick of the subject.

"May I venture?"

"Oh, certainly; but I doubt if you can tell me anything new."

"I—perhaps not. My excuse is, that I am going away for eight months. I have exchanged with another curate in town. He is delicate, and Mr. Ryan has kindly consented to the arrangement."

We have arrived at the entrance gates

"Will you spare me a few moments?" he goes on, "for I shall not see the end

of the affair, and—— This is not a bad seat," indicating a moss and ivy covered gravestone close to the ancient wall, and hidden from the passers-by.

I resign myself to my fate, with an ill grace enough, and take a seat upon the forgotten tomb. He leans against a battered head-stone, a broken cross lichen-grown, that marks another neglected grave close by. When I have become tired with waiting for him to begin I look up, and seeing his ruddy colour paled in the struggle he is having with his timidity, my heart relents, and I open the conversation.

"You were dining at Fairthorne last night?"

"Yes," he assents eagerly, "and it was there——" He stops.

To give him time, I search for the hidden name and date of the grave I

am reclining upon. I cannot find it; find instead several spiders, and one two beetles.

"Surely you have heard?" he recommences.

"Heard?"

"All F—— is talking of it—about your sister, and Mr. La Touche."

"Mr. La Touche!"

In my amazement I allow three spiders to cross my hand on the look out for safer habitation.

"Last night I, for the first time—believed (seeing is believing), this report—

"Ah."

"He is married."

"Certainly."

I have returned to my investigations.

"Miss Delaine, how can you take it so calmly!"

"I? What can I do?"

I have made out one letter of the inscription.

“Surely you have some influence with her, surely you cannot see her go——”

“You are on the wrong scent,” I interpose lazily.

“Wrong scent! What do you mean?”

“What I say.”

“It is not Mr. La Touche?”

“It is not Mr. La Touche.”

“But it *is*.”

“But it isn’t.”

“But I saw with my own eyes——”

“Ah, *outsiders* see the most after all,”

I observe, chuckling feebly at my *double entendre*.

“You were not there.”

“But *outsiders*—— Oh! something has run up my sleeve.”

He takes no notice, nor does he offer to help me as I vigorously shake my arm

to unearth the prying insect. He takes off his hat, and in his childlike eyes there is a great bewilderment.

I rise from the mouldy old tomb.

"Rest content, Mr. Williams," I say patronizingly, "my sister is not in love with Mr. La Touche, nor is Mr. La Touche in love with my sister. Rumour, as usual, has put the saddle on the wrong horse. Good-bye."

"I wish I could think it—I wish I could think it." He is wringing his hands together, he does not see mine outstretched to take leave.

"You have listened to report——"

"I did not believe it," he interrupts almost passionately.

"And so," I go on calmly, "you have met with the usual fate of those who give ear to the multitude, you have been put on the *wrong scent*."

“But I saw——”

“What you were *prepared* to see. Outsiders always see the most—outsiders like *me*. Good-bye, again. I hope you will like town.”

His blue eyes are dim with perplexity ; he takes my hand limply in his and lets it drop.

Just outside the gate I encounter Miss Ryan. There is no escape. Again I am the victim of fate. Recent dissipation has not stolen an atom of the bluish red that suffuses her large cheeks and lips, nor has it planted in the calm eyes the faintest spark of excitement, nor hung the langour of reaction on the ever-smiling mouth. She is as usual. Only in her ungloved hand she carries some roses whose loveliness looks woefully out of place.

“How do you do ? how are you ? so

glad to meet you. I have called, and found you out. I suppose your sister forgot to tell you, as I asked her, that I intended coming to see you to-day?"

"I believe she did mention something of the kind, but, to tell you the truth" (why do people always use this formula when they are going to tell anything but the truth?), "I found it so terribly hot indoors."

"Ah, quite so. I quite understand and yet this hot weather is so pleasant."

"I hate it."

"Do you? To my mind there is something heavenly in a warm day without the glare of the sun."

"I like the sun."

We are walking together in the direction of High Street. I cannot help casting a longing glance at her flowers. Two are of the kind called La France

pink, with curled back petals of delicatest hue, and one of a dark crimson, whose name I know not.

"Are you fond of flowers?" she asks.

"Rather."

"I *adore* them. I am taking these to a sick friend, or I would offer them to you. They are from the rectory."

"Oh."

"I saw your sister last night," she begins again, finding I am absolutely without conversation. "She was looking lovely."

"It's a way she has."

"I never saw any dress suit her so perfectly as that white muslin. She ought always to wear white. All the men——"

"There," I break in, "is Dr. Bland. I must go and speak to him." I am half across the road before I have finished

my sentence. The doctor, seeing the dead set I am making at him, stands awaiting me, smiling and holding out both his hands.

"Well, what is it, Nina?"

"That woman," I gasp, slightly out of breath. "I cannot bear her, and so——"

"So, you thought, any port in a storm, even the old doctor. Well, I am glad to see you. But I must say a word in defence of that 'storm.' She is a very good woman. I meet her often enough beside the sick and dying, also the broken-hearted."

"I know, I know, and—but oh! go on talking, please, for there she is actually waiting for me. Talk, talk, talk. What a fine day it is! How long it is since we had any rain. Are you in a good temper? Anything, anything."

He smiles, but does not help me.

"Is she there still? I dare not look round.

"Yes."

"I know what I'll do. I'll translate a German exercise out of Ollendorf. 'How is my good father? Has your cousin any legs? Where is the good penknife of my bad brother? It is in the garden of my grandmother. Has your uncle fallen off the pear tree? My uncle has fallen off the pear tree and broken one leg and one arm. May he not have a wooden leg and a golden arm? He may have a brass leg and a silver arm.' Has she gone?"

He laughs and nods his head.

I fan myself with my right-hand
love.

"Well? Are you quite exhausted?
Foolish little woman, that you are."

"Quite. I shall not be able to move a step until Miss Ryan has disappeared."

"She is no longer to be seen."

"Did you see which turn she took, down High Street, or the other way?"

"The other way."

"Then I'll proceed——"

"Wait one moment. You haven't let me get in a word edgeways. It is my turn to repeat an exercise now. But, Nina," his voice changing, "all I want to say is, that I understand now your grief, your tears of that Sunday. It—— they were *not* for yourself, as indeed I knew, my unselfish child, but for another—— I want to tell—ah, here is George coming—— I want to tell you," he goes hurriedly, as his son approaches, "that I am watching, and that all a friend *can* I will do to save her—Well, George?"

After greeting me casually, Dr. George

says a word or two in a low tone to his father, and they both hurry away.

"Another victim of the vulgar tongue. Why, what wiseheads they are!" I soliloquize as I trudge homewards. "Why doesn't he consult Dr. George? *he* could tell him a truer tale; but the old man is evidently afraid to mention the subject to him. Maggie, Maggie, Maggie! where shall we find the end of the skein that your beauty is tangling?"

CHAPTER XII.

"I wish you had not torn up that copy of Figaro's serenade," said Maggie to me as I lie half asleep upon the sofa resting my arm.

"Why?"

"Because," says Maggie (she is sewing something or other, some fal-de-lal to meet his eye, I suppose), "I want to practise the accompaniment."

"Really."

There is something so meaning in the tone of my voice, she lays her sewing down and looks at me.

"And may I ask," I proceed, looking

at her through my half-closed eyelids,
"why you wish to practise the accompaniment of that song?"

"I have taken a fancy to it," she answers shyly, taking up her work again,
"and so, I—I want to learn it—to sing it!"

The red has risen in her cheek. The blush remains as she sews. She is very quiet this evening, almost sad.

"Taken a fancy to it! How very funny. Now I come to think of it, *I* took a fancy to it once—long ago!"

"Ah, yes! your lover used to sing it."

There is a queer sort of shake in her voice. I cannot see her face, for I have turned mine to the wall.

"And, perhaps," I say drawlingly,
'perhaps *your* lover sings it now!'

There is a dead, dead silence.

I count the pattern on the wall. It is

an ugly pattern ; some dots enclosed in a curved space, some leaves, Heaven knows of what ! and twirligiggy lines surrounding and joining and making fun of them. I am counting the dots. There are not an even number in each curved space. It is satisfactory to find fault with so hideous a paper. I can hear my watch ticking in my belt.

“ You are silent this evening,” I remark at last, rather hoarsely.

‘ Silent ? ’

“ Ay, *silent*. I made an observation about your lover. I suggested that perhaps he sang the serenade from Figaro. Does he ? ”

“ Lover ! You forget the ‘ s,’ Ninas. Their name is legion.”

“ Ay ! But what is *his* name—the *one* who sings this song ? for he does sing it—I—I could swear it ! ”

Again silence. How I hate these silences that so often fall between us now. Perplexed, miserable, meaningless, and yet meaning silences. They come upon me as a darkness, sudden, depressing, impenetrable. I think Maggie hates them too. She escapes from them as often as she can, by leaving the room on some pretext. On this occasion she rises. I can see her shadow on the ugly paper. She rises uneasily, her work in her hand.

"It is time to go to bed," she says.

"You have not answered my question," say to the shadow on the wall—the graceful swaying shadow with drooped head. "I asked you what is the name of the lover who sings Figaro's serenade."

I can see the bit of work in the shadow's hand trembling. I am in a merciless mood to-night.

"What is his name?" I repeat.

"I cannot tell you!"

The words come as a cry, and *the* shadow throws up its hands, and covers its face with them.

"*You cannot tell me?* Are you, then, ashamed of it?"

No answer. Only a quiver shakes the bowed shadow on the wall.

"How long is this farce to continue? I am getting weary of it."

"Nina, Nina, Nina!"

The shadow has disappeared from the wall, Maggie is kneeling by my side, and has taken, against my wish, my hand in hers.

"Forgive me," she pleads whisperingly, "I have *promised* not to tell what—what you ask."

There is a pause.

"Since when," I ask slowly, with my

face still turned away, "did you make this promise?"

"Last night."

"Only last night! And all the weeks that went before, what prevented your telling me during all that time?"

"My heart," she interrupts passionately, "my weak, wicked heart. Often, often I tried to—I—oh, Nina, forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?"

"For my deceit. I only—only didn't, couldn't tell you, because—because I knew it would hurt you. I could not *bear* to."

"Do not trouble yourself."

I try to withdraw my hand, but she still holds it. I am looking at her now, looking at her bowed head.

"Do not trouble yourself. What you have done, or left undone, has hurt me

far, far more than your confidence—that ~~the~~ confidence that I have been *dying for*, no matter what it was—could have hurt me.”

I have risen and left her kneeling there by the empty couch.

“Nina——”

“Let us have no hysterics.”

How I hate myself to-night, how I hate my sneers, my bitter words; and yet I go on, always in the same cruel strain.

“You are not the first person who has acted so for the best. I don’t wish to blame you, only you have made ~~a~~ mistake.”

She is standing now, and over her changeful face a cold, hard look is spreading, brought there, I doubt not, by my detestable words.

“I have, as you say, done it for the best,” she says, “to spare you pain. It

the first thing I have ever hidden from
, Nina ; and further than that I have
e you no hurt."

You couldn't have hurt me more,"
ry. Then sternly I check myself.
nough, let us talk of other things—
Do you know the last scandal,
ggie, the very last ? "

pick up her work, a bit of blue
on and lace, and smooth it out.

No."

Why, only that you and Mr. La
ache are in love with each other.
, Maggie ! and he a married man—
y, child, are you going to faint ? " I
ak off, for she is staring at me with
red eyes, and her face has turned like
th.

he shakes her head, I don't think she
speak, and sits down, trying to smile.
this moment there resounds a tremen-

dous thump on the door, which is the signal of Mrs. Riddel's maid's appearing. She enters, with a smutty face and a heavy tread, and deposits a letter on Maggie's knee. Faint as she is, she tries instantly to shield the missive from my eye. But I have seen, and recognize the handwriting; as, indeed, why should I not, having carried the writer's autograph about with me for thirteen years? I withdraw the arm I have half flung round her, and watch from a distance the colour ebbing back to her cheeks and lips.

"I don't know what ails me," she says at length. "I suppose it's the—the weather."

"Oh, the weather, of course."

"You don't believe—this report, Nina?" she asks with a catch in her breath. Her eyes seek mine anxiously,

and then sink beneath them ; the hand that covers the unread letter trembles visibly.


“I? No! *I know better.* . . . Turn off the gas when you have read your letter, for I am off to bed.”

She is a long, long time reading that letter. It gives her pleasure, and she lingers over it. His kind written words are surely better to her soul than my harsh sneers.

She lingers long. I am in bed and am pretending to sleep when she slowly enters the room, slowly, in a preoccupied manner—her thoughts are far away.

“Far away, far away,” I whisper to myself as I gaze upon her sleeping by my side, “dreaming of her lover.”

On her sweet, closed mouth there lies the faint reflection of a smile, like the memory of his kiss.



CHAPTER XIII.

-- If he does her wrong I will kill him."

I begin to reflect upon this vow of Dr. George's, put by in my brain as being very far from the subject in hand. I fetch it out from its corner and look it in the face, to see whether it is real or not, for Maggie is drooping. How I hate that word "drooping." It is so vague, so alarming, so *quiet*. It sets one thinking of a flower; and when a flower droops, it revives again sometimes. *Sometimes*, yes, and oftener. . . .

"If he does her wrong I will kill him."
I am growing fond of this sentence. I find myself repeating it over to myself, as

it were hugging it. For I love her best. Best of any in the world, and, not counting the short delirium of my week's engagement, have always loved her best.

At first I pretend not to notice her languor, her loss of colour and appetite. It will mend, I judge. It is but the sickness of love. The weather is hot, and the love is hot. Sleepless nights make languid days; languor spoils the appetite; when one doesn't eat one grows thin and pale. Yet the weather changes and cools, and the love must be losing its first excitement; it is two months, nearly three months old, and—Maggie does not gain strength, does not reassert her youth. I can no longer shut my eyes to her altered looks, nor prevent my tongue from remarking on them.

“You are not well,” I say abruptly one morning at breakfast, seeing her push

aside her food and sip her tea feverishly, with lips parched and red, too red.

She lifts her great eyes, they seem to have grown larger lately, full of nervous questioning to mine.

"I am quite well, I—I believe."

"Maggie, leave off this horrid teaching for awhile and rest—we can afford it."

"Oh no, no, no!" she cries, the tears—they used not to be so ready—starting in her eyes.

"Why not? You say the Baroness is talking of giving the children a holiday and Mr. La Touche is away. How long has he been away?"

"A fortnight."

"Ever since you dined there?"

"Yes. He went away the next day."

I am silent, pondering. I begin to see the reason of Maggie's depression. She has not been able to see her lover; for, Mr

La Touche being away, there have naturally come to Mr. Coulter no invitations from Fairthorne. *There* it was they met, there it was they held their trysts, and now—— Men are so faithless; finding the opportunities for this love-making few and difficult, perhaps he has tired of it, and gone after some other amusement.

"If he does her wrong I will kill him."

"What are you whispering to yourself, Nina?" asks Maggie listlessly.

"Something which keeps ringing in my ears. Won't you take a few holidays, Maggie?"

"I'll see about it."

That evening, as I am taking a lonely stroll through the town, I encounter the last person in the world I wish to see, which is always the very person one runs up against.

She is in high good humour. She has

just seen an old woman safe off to heaven—Miss Ryan is accountable for the expression. She is radiant over the event.

“Such peace, such perfect trust, such a beautiful journey to the Promised Land! Ah, may you, or I, dear friend——”

“Thank you,” I respond with so much asperity, “I don’t want to take that particular journey just now.”

“No, no; but when our time comes

“It won’t be the *same* time,” I reject the feeling certain that Heaven could not be so unmerciful as to cast my lot in death with Miss Ryan’s.

“Whenever it comes I only hope I shall have the same assurance, the same——”

“To change the subject—one I am not at home with, as *you* know, my dear Miss Ryan—have you seen any of our mutual friends to-day?”

"Yes," she answers with unabated friendliness, "I have just seen Mr. La Touche driving from the station towards Fairthorne. He has evidently just come back."

"Mutual friend he is not. And yet I take an interest in him for Maggie's sake."

How she stares at me! How blankly, how uncomprehendingly! I have known her eyes always as being the most cow-like, the most vacant I have ever met; but never have I seen them so *staringly* expressionless as at this moment. She is evidently thinking of the dead old woman—is, perhaps, entering the kingdom of heaven with her in spirit. Taking advantage of her being so engaged with heavenly thoughts, I nod at her, and pursue my way. She is too abstracted to return my farewell sign. I look back

after I have gone some distance down ~~the~~ street, and discover her standing in ~~the~~ same position, gazing after me with the same idiotic fixity of eye.

* * * * *

Scratch, scratch, scratch. I think, ~~o~~ all irritating small noises, the scratching of a pen travelling over paper is the ~~most~~ maddening. Maggie has been writing ~~ever~~ since nine o'clock this evening. It ~~is~~ now close on ten. She has taken up ~~her~~ position at my painting-table, and ~~there~~ she sits and scrapes away with what I ~~am~~ sure must be a bad pen. Every now ~~and~~ then she half turns her head and regards me. I am reading a book Dr. Bland has lent me, reclining comfortably in our armchair almost immediately under the gaselier.

She is very flushed this evening, and as she raises her head to look at me there

are tears in her eyes. I can see her brush them away before she recommences her letter. Why should she seek *my* face ever and anon as she writes? What have I to do with her letter? How is it that I am mixed up in her love-messages? Is she wondering whether I ever felt towards him as she feels? Is she wondering if I would sit so calmly perusing this unexciting novel if I guessed to whom she is addressing her thoughts this long evening through?

The tale I am reading might as well have been written in Hindoostanee for all I can understand of it. Gibberish, gibberish! with Maggie's eyes for ever looking through it! Inquiringly, and sadly, so sadly, I feel as though the tears in them must fall upon my book. I find myself trying to wipe away these imaginary blots. I glance up impatiently, and meet her

real eyes, with real tears in them, and behind the tears her soul appealing to mine in a way I cannot understand.

"To whom *are* you writing?" I ask half angrily. "Scribble, scribble, scribble, you go the whole time. I cannot read—it fidgets me so."

"I have nearly done."

She turns her eyes away, and I see her fingers steal up to them to dispel the misty cloud from between them and the paper.

"Who is your correspondent—if one might ask? Any one I know?"

"Yes; some one you know."

She half smiles, a sad little smile, as she answers.

"Perhaps the same address as Katy of the song transcribed on her vague epistle would likewise fit this of yours—'From Maggie, to one whom she loves dearly'?"

"Yes, it would fit it very well."

She has turned to me again, and her eyes are dwelling on me with the same mournful, wistful look.

I cannot stand it. I fancy she is *pitying* me. At any rate, there is love in her eyes, and ruth. I throw my novel aside, get up, and declare my intention of going to bed. Yes, there is certainly pity in her eyes as she regards me steadily, an affectionate *pity*.

"Do you not find your novel interesting?" she asks.

"No. It has all been done before. Like most things, it is stale, stale, stale. . . . All I remember of it is the heading to one of the chapters. You may find an *à propos* place for it in your letter—

'But say, does love e'er vanish?
No, never more, if it be true.'

CHAPTER XIV.

"It is a perfect day," I say, as I lean out of the window and watch Maggie down the street. I have not so watched her for many a morning. But this morning—it is because of the lovely weather, perhaps; perhaps because of her unwonted sadness last night—I feel *constrained* to follow her with my eyes as long as ever they can rest on her. She does not turn nor look back when she reaches the corner. She is thinking of other things. She has been thinking of other things ever since she woke. She has scarcely seemed to see me. And yet suddenly she kissed me, just as she was turning from me to leave—

the room. It was done partly in absence of mind, I think, partly from a sort of compunctious feeling.

It is a perfect day. Cloudless, sunny, warm, and still. In the air the bland cool breath of autumn, smelling of ripe wheat and pungent scented flowers, makes itself welcome to the nostrils. I sniff it up, as a fainting person the odour of wine. Summer's passionate heart has throbbed itself cool, has sighed away its over zeal, and settles down comfortably into an atmosphere, cheerful, pleasant, temperate, as that love is supposed to be which has the reputation of out-lasting passion.

"A day that ought to bring us good," I meditate. "A day on which some pleasant, jocund thing might well happen."

So exhilarating an effect has the bright morning upon me I cannot sit down at

ness to my card painting. I must needs tell the piano and begin to strum some little melody. I am making such a noise ~~opening the keys~~ that I do not hear any ~~the knocking~~ at the door. I become conscious all in a moment that Mrs. Riddel is standing inside the room with her best bonnet and jacket on.

"I beg your pardon, miss. I knocked several times, and hearing you playing I made bold——"

"What is it?" I ask with curiosity, for Mrs. Riddel is a person not often seen by her lodgers. She is a very respectable elderly *widow* person, plausible of speech and shrill of voice. "What is it, Mrs. Riddel?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Miss Delaine, I didn't like to send Lavinia" (the maid of all work) "up with the message, so I came myself."

I am sitting on the music-stool facing her, and am wondering how old she is. Her thin, unwrinkled face, her smooth grey-brown hair give no clue.

“ A message ? ”

“ Well, yes, miss. I must explain. Half an hour ago I had no thought of much a thing, when in came my brother-in-law from Meadowsweet Farm, and asks me to come and spend the day with my sister, his wife, as they have other friends coming, and——”

“ Yes,” I interrupt impatiently.

“ Well, Miss Delaine, I’m coming to the point. Miss Maggie, just before she went out this morning, gave me this letter ” (showing a letter directed in Maggie’s handwriting to me), “ and desired me, made me promise indeed, miss, not to give it into your hands until after five this evening. I promised to do as she

wished, bless her bonnie face! and meant to keep my promise, when in come my brother-in-law and persuades me to join them, as I am telling you; and so I have nothing for it but to ask you, miss, to take charge of this letter for me—praying Miss Maggie to forgive me—and *not* to open *it*, please, miss, until after the hour named. No doubt she has some pretty surprise for you, Miss Nina, seeing she was so particular about the hour. Good-day, miss.” She lays the letter down upon the key-board and departs.

I get up from the piano. I cannot stay near that letter; it is fearful to me. Maggie to write to me—to *me*. Then, I can tell you, there is no good news.

Good-day, good-day! That was what she said, that woman—that fiend that brought it here. Good God! Good

Heaven! she might have said, but—good-bay, ha—ha, *good-day!*

It was pleasant just now, and cool. The weather has changed suddenly. It is stifling, oppressive, unbearable. It is as much as I can do to prevent turning out, sitting here at the window and catching every breath of air that is abroad.

I think it is time to be beginning my oil painting. The morning is wearing late. Eleven o'clock. One, two, three, four, five, six hours until it is five o'clock in the afternoon. Just my tea time. I wish it was my tea time. Six hours.

I don't feel as though I could wait so long for my tea. Nonsense, I must set to work and paint, and then dinner, and then. . . .

I seat myself at the table and arrange my work. It is not easy to paint with fingers about as steady as a poppyhead

when the wind is blowing across the wheat fields.

“*Miss Delaine, Miss Delaine.*” Maggie’s fingers must have been almost as unsteady when she penned that address. Her hands are not accustomed to shake. — It is no use to try and paint. I must see if the address is really as crooked as I think. Yes, quite. Why, I can remember Maggie’s letters from school, when she was quite a baby, and the childish characters were better formed than these.

I take it up, and bring it to, the window. It does not feel very thick. As it lies lightly on my palm a gust of wind comes, lifts it, and sweeps it from me out of the window. The first sensation I have is one of absolute and keen relief.

Presently I peer out of the window, but can discover no trace of the note.

What does it matter? It *cannot* have been of any great importance. Why, Maggie will be back shortly after five, and I can hear all about it from her own lips.

All about it. All about what? What *can* this thing be which she *writes* to me?

Something which she cannot say. But she has promised not to say *that*. Yet it *can* be nothing else, nothing but the stale, flat news of my one-time lover becoming her now-time lover. I wish she hadn't broken her promise to him. I don't want to read her confession, her horribly tardy and perfectly stale confession.

I am glad the letter is lost.

I have been playing at painting for a few minutes only when Mrs. Riddel's "familiar" bumps at the door, and enters at my command in morning *déshabille*.

Rough and capless head, sleeves tucked up, a large and much soiled apron of uncertain hue covering her for the most part. She is clutching a corner of this apron in her hand, and out of its dingy folds I see the corner of an envelope protruding.

“Please, miss, as I was a-washin’ the ary steps, miss, this” (emphasizing the fold in her apron) “fell right into my bucket. It’s directed to you, miss, as far as I see. It’s right soaked through, miss, for I never seed it drop, only a-flopping in the water when I wants to dip my brush in. Maybe a genam, miss, a-passin’ may ha’ dropt it, miss, in pullin’ out his handkerchief.”

“Very likely. Put it down here.” I indicate with my paint-brush a clear space on my table.

Lavinia, a good-hearted girl for all the

pretentious title of her, lays the sodden missive by my side, and with a grin vanishes.

I go on painting.

If I chose to look up, I might read some of this adventurous letter, for so soaked is it the writing shows through, and where Lavinia's honest thumb has pressed it, the envelope is torn.

I wish I had told Lavinia to lay it somewhere else. I cannot help reading it if I look up.

I take my handkerchief stealthily from my pocket and throw it over the letter.

I am thinking of Mrs. Riddel's bonnet.

I wish she could find some more becoming colour than lilac. It was all lilac, an ugly reddish lilac, and her face is somewhat the colour of brown paper. There was a cluster of pink flowers in front of this bonnet, May blossoms I suppose they

were meant for. I think they can hardly be securely fastened in, they gave such a lurch forward when she said, "Good-day."

Good-day, good-day, good-day! How the words seem to mock me. The laughter of the fiends must so have derided Margarite when she was suffering an agony of suspense, an agony of love. And yet where is the analogy. I do not suffer. I have no anxiety. I am painting tranquilly. My hands no longer tremble.

Good-day, good-day, good-day!

"Good-day, Miss Nina."

A real voice echoes the mocking words. I start violently, and knock down with my elbow several articles from the table, among them my letter and handkerchief.

"I ventured to come in, as you did not respond to my tap, and as the door was a little open," goes on Dr. Bland in

his pleasant voice. "Allow me," he adds, for I am groping after my letter.

I do not answer, for I am holding Maggie's sodden letter in my hand, and as part of its contents strikes my vision I tear it open. . . .

"What is it, Nina, Nina?" I hear the doctor crying. He shakes my arm. He tries to snatch the letter from me. "Nina, have you gone mad? Speak one word—one word. Has the worst happened?"

I hide the letter from him, hide every word of its horrible, blurred message, crumpling it up in my hand, while my fingers close over it rigid as iron. With an immense effort I speak.

"Nothing—has—happened."

"Good God! what makes you look so, then?"

"I must say good—good-day, if—you

will excuse—me. I have to go to Fairthorne—at *once*. I—have had—an invitation.”

I am on my way to Fairthorne. Above me the far blue sky, so bright and still, around me the dark green verdure of the trees and hedges. I take the shortest way, for I am in maddest haste. The gate I enter, leading into a wood, and from thence across two fields into the park, is half a mile at least nearer than the grand entrance by the lodge. The shortest way—the shortest way, for I am in maddest haste. . . . Through the little pine copse, the warm sweet scent of the fir trees feeling to my wildly throbbing nerves as a hindering hand, I speed. Into the meadow where my feet sink in the bright green second crop, which seems to clog my flying steps.

Over a stile to the next meadow, and then my breath begins to flag a little. It has been all uphill since the wood, and this field rises quite steeply in the centre. I climb the ridge somewhat slowly, listening to my own panting and the cawing of some distant rooks.

I have scaled the ridge, I can see the house, the rose-garden—the park with its clumps of timber, the thick hawthorn hedge bounding the field, the— Merciful Heavens! what is that animal, with lowered horns and pawing hoof between me and the gate, close to the gate—the shut gate?

The physical terror of my life has always been embodied in a bull—an angry bull. It has been my nightmare, my evil dream, the haunting fear of my solitary rambles. Now it confronts me in reality. There is no escape, for he has seen me,

and as I turn to flee he advances. I *turn* to flee, but in truth I have no strength to make a single step. I am frozen with my terror, I am almost dead with fatigue.

As I stop, the bull stops—roars, not loudly, but deeply, and gazes at me with his lurid eyes.

Overpowering the anguish of personal fear, overwhelming the dread of death, comes back upon me the supreme anxiety that has led me hither.

Must I die—must I die *just too soon*? “Dear God in heaven! . . . one day, one day more, . . .” so my shuddering soul makes supplication.

I totter and clasp my hands, the bull makes a step towards me, he is *guarding* the gate. He is playing with me, as a cat with a mouse. He knows I cannot escape.

As my eyes roam wildly round they light upon a group—a charming group—

in the shadow of a noble clump of beeches in a hollow, not two hundred yards from the guarded gate.

There they are, she and he. He is lying on the grass, she is standing by him. The children, two fair-haired things, are with them.

They look so tranquil, so happy.

Can it then have been all a dream? If it were so, if it only could be so, I might thank God now, even now, waiting as I am for death.

A shout might reach them. I cannot find my voice; I cannot make a sound. I can hear the children's laughter, shrill and gay. . . . How grandly dark and heavy the foliage of those great beech. . . . I can see the window, the drawing-room window that I watched that night, and the walk where they paced together, and the bush—that must be it, where I

hid. . . . One of the children has se Maggie's hand, and is dragging her petuously towards the gate.

I cannot stand here all day. I make an effort. I falter, and turn angry roar greets the movement, and I try to hasten. Another roar, closer to ear. If I could but gain the stile. Dear God, one day, only one! Another roar, another and another, more irritated each one, but *further off*. . . . I soon be safe, soon. I am gaining strength and nerve. I cast a frightened glance over my shoulder, and—stop still. The bull has *other prey*. Maggie is in the field, a few paces from the gate, standing at bay. I have not yet begun to descend the rising ground, so that I am but a hundred yards from her, when she makes a horrible rush at her.

“Don't be frightened, Nina,” she said.

out in her clear voice. And then she goes down before his terrible horns, and lies under his pitiless hoofs.

I see mistily a man climbing the gate as I run, no longer with failing limbs, to where my dearest is being done to death. Before I can reach her there is the sound of a sharp report, and the bull staggers and falls, like a loosened mound of earth slides from a shelving cliff, lying after the sudden avalanche moveless as the sea-shore boulders. And she, she is lying still too-white and still. And on her light dress there is a stain—a dark red stain, when at last I reach her, at last, when I cannot help her. . . . I kneel down by her, I put my arm under her head. I try and speak to her, but no words come.

“She is only in a faint.” So he speaks, the first words he has addressed to me for thirteen years.

"Maggie, my heart, my heart!" I whisper wildly. "Open your eyes, and tell me, tell me——"

"She will be better presently," says Dr. George's voice. And, looking up, I see him standing by me, with a pistol in his hand—a pistol with a smoking barrel.

"Save her, oh, save her! See here, here"—pointing to the stain upon her bosom—"is where the horn went in . . ."

"Hush! she is coming to."


The large brown eyes open, and turn at once, as if by instinct, to her lover.

"Where is—Nina?"

"Here, here. I—I'm all right, darling."

"I am—glad." She looks at me now. "Poor old Nina! I think it is about the end. . . . Dr. George?"

Questioningly she pronounces his name. He is kneeling by her, and is trying to



feel if still her pulses promise life. He makes no answer.

“It is, perhaps, better it should end so. Nina?”

“My heart!”

“What—brings—you here? Did you—get my letter?”

“Don’t talk,” commands Dr. George brusquely.

“Yes; I got it. I read it. I know all,” I whisper hurriedly in her ear. “It is all no matter, now.”

“No, it is all no matter *now*, as you say. Wouldn’t you rather I—I came to this end, Nina *mia*? . . . Edward,” turning to her lover, feebly stretching out her hand to him, “put your arm round—me; hold me close, and—then—I shall not care.”

As he obeys her, she faints away again.

“I must go,” says Dr. George, “and

fetch a stretcher. It is the only way we shall be able to get her home. . . . Lay her down, La Touche."

And the man who can change his name as easily, it appears, as his affections, let my darling sink gently to the ground ; and the coarse blades of meadow-grass touch and stroke her unconscious face inquisitively as it slowly droops upon them. . . . Then he looks at me.

CHAPTER XV.

MANY, many among us have known what it is to go down with their heart's dearest, down into the Valley of the Shadow, to grope about there blindly for days and nights, their prayers for deliverance almost suffocated upon their lips with hopelessness; to see faint, deceptive glimmers of light, to lie in the darkness face downwards, more nearly dead than the dying, and then at last to catch sight of the old familiar light of life, dim and distant, and to drag with feeble half-spent strength the beloved one towards this dawn.

“Out of danger, out of immediate

danger," says Dr. George to me hurriedly as I follow him out of Maggie's room, and we stand together in the parlour.

"Will she get well?"

"I cannot say."

His eyes will not meet mine.

"If—if she *doesn't*—how long?"

"She will last a couple of months, at any rate. The lung is hurt, you see, and though the *active* mischief is subsiding. . . . She may get up this afternoon and lie upon this sofa. The change will do her good. It is her *strength* we must try and keep up, and then—we are but mortal, we doctors, Miss Delaine, we have not second sight—good-bye."

"You cannot give any *real* hope?"

He does not answer. He shakes his head slightly and goes away.

And I have to creep back to the sick-room—Mrs. Riddel has allowed us to

change our bedroom, to one on the same floor as our sitting-room—and meet her eager questioning with the scanty consolation he has afforded me.

“What does he say? I have heard you talking—what does he say?”

She is not much changed, this lovely human flower, like a red rose fading. Her petals are all perfect as yet, and their hue only so very little altered.

“He says you may get up, presently, and lie on the sofa in the next room.”

“I know, he told me that; but what did he say about my getting well? I’m so much better. It’s only this cough, and that’s better; my fever is gone, he owns that, and I spit hardly any blood. When does he say I shall be quite well—never?”

“My darling, he does not know.” I am sitting by her, and have her hand

in mine, her hand that is so restless now.


“Prevaricator! Never mind, I know now that he thinks I am dying—*dying*.”

“He——”

“Hush, he *almost* told me so Don’t grieve, Nina *mia*” (for I have turned away my face, I dare not let her see it), “but, tell me honestly, wouldn’t you rather I—I came to this end, than ran away with Mr. La Touche?”

I do not answer.

“Just think, if I were not lying here” (she goes on dreamily, sinking back on the pillow she has raised herself from), “I should be *with him* far, far away, *with him*. . . . Dying? why, Nina, I never think of dying, or heaven, or anything of that sort. I think of him, always, always just of him How I long to see him. Doesn’t it strike you as being



rather—rather curious that he has never been here, Nina?”

“He has sent to inquire; and I hear the Baroness is ill.”

“Still, don’t you think he might have come just once? Why, if it hadn’t been for that bull, he and I—we would be all in all to each other by now. Are you sorry, Nina, that we were prevented?”


For the life of me I cannot answer “yes.” Any, *any* alternative seems better to me than that she should *die*.

“He would have been tired of me perhaps . . . would he?”

“It is not likely. You must not talk, Maggie.”

She sighs, and turns her head aside. I watch her eyelids fall, and a fitful sleep steals over her.

For a few minutes only does she slumber.



"I have been dreaming," she says eagerly as her eyes open, "of him. . . . Nina, I *must* see him; go and fetch him. What does it matter! I am dying. Tell him I am dying, and that I am *longing* to see him. He will come then, even—even his wife won't mind that."

"When you get better."

"I shall never get better until I see him. Oh" (sitting up and stretching out her hot hands), "you don't *know* how I hunger to see him, how my whole body *aches* to feel his touch! Nina, if you love me——"

"My heart!"

"You will go, you will, you will, you will! You never have denied me anything. You will not begin *now*."

"Maggie, darling——"

"Say you will do this for me, and it

will give me strength to get up, and perhaps, who knows, to get well."

I bow my forehead on her nervous, pleading hands, I clasp passionately the wrists where the life flutters and bounds and fails, the life that is my life, and—go to do her bidding.

* * * * *

"She is dying," I say to myself on my way to Fairthorne, "and so it will not appear strange to him, and he can come later dark."

About myself I do not think. My life, my pains and passions, are all swallowed up in *her* life, her failing, fainting life. Everything hangs upon it. I *die* with her. My very breath grows troubled with hers; my pulses quicken when the fever surges hers.

I am not thinking of myself. It is no moment to me that I am on my

way to meet the ghost of my old love. The thought, did it enter my head, would not flutter my heart.

It is of her I think. I am careful that no disgrace shall fall upon her name, her name that *death* has saved. Now it must not be sullied. He must come after dark and *once* will not matter.

I have left the town, and am just turning into the high-road to Chalk Bay when I encounter Dr. George.

"Miss Delaine!" he exclaims in surprised tones.

"I am going for a little walk."

"Ah, I dare say you need it after all your nursing. May I," he hesitates, and looks at his watch, "accompany you some of the way?"

"Certainly," I answer with a sinking heart.

He walks by my side in silence. I

think he finds it difficult to say what is on his mind, and he does not take the trouble to make conversation. It is I who speak at length.

"By-the-bye, Dr. George, we have never thanked you."

"*Thanked me!*"

"Yes, for your timely shot."

"Oh, *that*."

"How merciful, lucky, I was going to say, that you were there, and——"

"Allow me to explain," he says in a bitter way; "you will keep your thanks to yourself then. Do you remember my telling you I would shoot La Touche if he did your sister wrong?—not likely you would—yet I did vow it, and I was waiting that morning. . . . Miss Delaine, if you had not stopped them, nor the bull, there was still a bullet in my pistol that would have hindered their progress. . . .

You wonder how I knew of their intention? I got no letter, but I went to see the Baroness that morning, because my father was summoned elsewhere, and she told me that her husband was to drive Miss Maggie to Chalk Bay early in the afternoon to see some of her friends there. It was a poor device, wasn't it? and yet it took in the old lady; but I, I had read the context, and I loaded my pistol—I had carried it with me always for three weeks before—and waited. . . . Bah! you and the bull bungled it, after all. It would have been a neater affair if my bullet had found out his heart."

"Which it never could, for he has none." Directly I have said the words I am sorry. He turns to me his haggard face, grown haggard only of late days, and eyes dark and heavy.

"I am speaking as a doctor," he says

ning. "He has a vital organ called heart, of that *I* am well assured; as to his affections—I must leave the ladies to decide on them."

"Dr. George, how you sneer!"

"Sneer! I feel, when I speak of him, as if I must *choke*!"

We are passing the entrance gates of Airthorne. I dare not stop, nor indicate in any way that the stately house far up under on the slope is my destination. We walk on gloomily. I am getting very tired.

"Do you know," he recommences, unable apparently to leave the subject, "that this man's, this La Touche's name was, and indeed is, Coulter? Mr. Coulter La Touche, at your service; only he never signs, nor uses his first name. He took his wife's name, to please her.

She tells me, she thought, and rightly, that Baroness La Touche is a prettier

title than Mrs. Coulter, and so he is Mr. C. La Touche. . . . I can imagine it being a convenient thing to drop one's name sometimes, and personify a new character." He bends to me again his lurid eyes, eyes I never liked, and now their dull darkness repels me.

"Supposing, for instance," he goes on turning away his head, "that one had made love to a woman, got engaged to her, got, perhaps, disengaged from her, vowing, I dare say (people are so romantic when young), eternal constancy, and then presently, as the years rolled on, married some one else, and fell in love (it is just possible that a married man may) with, let us say, his old love's sister. . . . How convenient it would be, supposing he had changed his name when he married, wouldn't it, Miss Delaine, if the sisters happened to be *living together*?"

.

I shrug my shoulders. Then, after a pause, I say carelessly, "He has told you that silly old tale. I hardly thought he would have considered it worth while."

"And you say, *I sneer!*"

"To me the fact that I was once engaged to him is no more interesting than one of Dr. Watts' hymns, or the advertisement sheet of the *Times*. . . . Dr. George, I am tired to death. I can walk no further."

"Let us turn. Then you are not, have not been, jealous?"

He turns his face towards me, and I mark the bitter lines that jealous passion has stamped upon it, mark the ravages of this most fell disease upon every feature.

"Will you take my arm? You look, as you say, tired to death."

"Thank you. I can get along."

He watches me a moment, and then ~~h~~ smiles—a smile that only lately I have known as his.

“Yes, you *can get along*, women ~~O~~ your stamp always can. You have ~~n~~ answered my question about the jealousy ~~y~~ though. Are you jealous?”

“Heaven help me, *no!* I am only ~~sad~~ and anxious. . . . And you?” I ~~add~~ after a pause.

“I believe your answer might be mine,” he replies with a weary sigh. “There seems no room for passion, when death is anywhere near.”


A horseman approaches us at this moment, halts by Dr. George, and demands his presence by some sick-bed. I am left alone, feebly creeping to the entrance gates of Fairthorne.

CHAPTER XVI.

As I enter them, a quarter of an hour after Dr. George has left me, the sun breaks suddenly from a clouded sky and gilds the landscape, trees and fields, with the only gold that is of any worth.

As in a dream I wend my way up the avenue, shadowed by the heavy autumn foliage, flecked by the uncertain sunlight of the cloudy sky.

As in a dream I ask to see Mr. La Touche, and wait under the portico to receive permission to follow the low-voiced footman to whom I have given my name. . . . As in a dream at length I



stand in his presence. I hear him say,
“How do you do?” I see him hold out
his hand.

I cannot speak. I do not move.

As in a dream I stand gazing round
at the soft magnificence of the superbly
appointed room, at the streak of sunlight
finding a subdued entrance at one of the
curtained windows.

“Will you not sit down?”

How his tones shake me. My God!
even now, how his tones shake me!

“No, thank you,” I answer, staring at
the sunlight; it seems the only homely,
familiar thing in this place of ghosts.
“I—I have come to ask you—just to
ask you to come to see my sister, who is
dying.”

“Dying! And they told me she was
mending!”

I seat myself, because I can stand no

longer. He walks away a pace or two in a perturbed fashion, pushes his way in among the gimcrack tables and couches, knocks down a screen.

"Dying ? " he questions, standing before me again.

" Will you come after dark ? because, you see, people—— "

" Might talk."

" Will you come ? "

" Yes, if she wishes it. My wife is dying."

" Your wife ! "

" Yes, she is dying—*too late* ! "

" Ed—Mr. Coulter ! "

" *Too late—too late* ! It is always so. Miss Delaine, you have not altered."

I am looking up into his face again as if nothing had happened. And I am thinking, as in a dream, how troubled are his angry blue eyes, how worn and thin

his cheek, how saddened his mouth, the lines of which his full moustache fails to cover. The face of a man at war with his life—at war with his passions.

“You are not altered,” he says in his voice which, of all that has changed in him, is the one thing in which I can detect no difference.

“Not altered!” I echo impetuously, rising and waking as it were from a dream. “No, only grown from a young woman into an old one. Only grown indifferent where I once was tender—to the world’s opinion, I mean, else would you not see me here to-night. For her sake, for hers alone, always remember that, Mr. Coulter—La Touche, because there is none other in the wide world whom I love; and for her sake I have thus entreated you, and for her sake you will come?”

I will come, I have said it. Is there *immediate* danger ? ”

fancy I detect a shrinking in his
b.

No,” I answer sneeringly, “ you need
be alarmed. You shall be the spec-
r of nothing *unpleasant*. Good after-
n.”

He bows, and I see him turn to the
but I am out of the house before the
man can find his way from the ser-
vants’ quarters to attend upon my exit.

* * * * *

Yes, he is coming,” I say in answer
Maggie’s eyes, which question me as
to our sitting-room.

He is lying on the sofa, dressed in her
dress, a soft grey merino. I dis-
cover presently that Lavinia, who wor-
s “ Miss Maggie,” has plaited and
arranged her hair—hair that it is a

pleasure to touch, so soft and pliant is **it**. Her short illness has not hurt its beauty, it curls about her forehead and ears **in** its old caressing way. Her cheeks **are** full of colour. She is a little, a **very** little thinner, and that is all. **No**, not quite all: there has passed, **God** knows how, a delicate bloom from her—the freshness of the unplucked flower. *Gathered*. That is the word that **knocks** against my heart as I sit and watch her—knocks with a cruel, sudden blow. . . . Lovely still, fragrant, joy-giving; but *gathered*, and so fading. . . .

“Did he say he’d come willingly, quite willingly?”

“Quite willingly.”

She is quiet a little while. There slumbers a smile in her musing eyes. Her mouth quivers now and again.

“Did you tell him,” she asks as the

he turns from me and I make my escape.

And on my dress, as I sit by myself during the evening, there seems always a glow and a gleam as of fire.

she says, "just for the sake of appearances. You can go away afterwards, you know, because we shall like—to talk."

Then she laughs quite merrily. I try and join in her merriment. I look at her and try and persuade myself she is not dying.

She is so young. And youth, they say, can triumph over almost any ailment. Besides, even Dr. George does not quite give up hope, only he is cautious.

The door-bell rings loudly.

It is I who start nervously. She laughs, such a pleased, low laugh.

"Why, Nina," she says, looking at me with a glow of expectation in her eyes, "it is *you*, not I, who look ill. You might be dying with that pale, drawn face, and——"

Lavinia opens the door, and he enters.

not look at him, and yet I see—I see
kneel beside her, and take her hands
is, and bow his head.

I was just saying,” I hear her say
rously, “I was just saying that it is
a, not I, who looks as if she was
ing.”

He turns and regards me; holding her
hands, he turns and regards me.

And as I lift my face and look at him,
gravely assents to Maggie’s statement.
I smile at them as I rise to quit the
room. For all answer to them both, I
say.

And then a few moments afterwards,
when I am alone, I forget all about him,
remember only *her*, praying as I have
prayed, so ceaselessly during the past
night Heaven must be weary of my
petition—

Spare her, dear God, spare her life!”

CHAPTER XVII.

FORTY-EIGHT hours after Mr. La Touche had knelt beside Maggie's couch, his wife died. Dr. George says a shock killed her, by bringing on another stroke; and this shock was given her by one of her little daughters. The child came running to her with the news that the bull had run at Maggie and killed her, and was then killing Mr. La Touche.

She is dead. A consummation devoutly desired by her husband: as for the sake of this hope, he, in the first instance, married her.

Fairthorne is shut up for the present. The Baroness's children have been sent

to some relative of their mother's, and Mr. La Touche is taking a tour on the continent.

In the meantime the day is dawning again. Maggie is getting well.

Dr. George has summoned a learned man from London to corroborate his opinion. We could hardly believe it until he did this, until we heard the great physician pronounce his "yea."

She is to live! She is to live! Youth has triumphed in the conflict. Youth and a perfectly healthy constitution have defied disease. But she will always be delicate, at any rate for many years.

In the meantime she lives. Youth has triumphed, and *prayer*, I add to myself, *prayer without ceasing*.

We are very happy, we two. Happy in the sunlight, after our late dread journeying in the valley. Happy just

because of the sunlight, the sweet, familiar sunlight!

And now it is autumn, and the weather breaks, and the rains beat against our windows, and the night-shadows fall early; yet, all the same, we do not mind. - We have a fire and each other, and I read aloud during the long evenings, and so after our sore travail in pain and darkness we are content. I would say she is content. I am *more* than content.

I want nothing more than to see her getting better and stronger day by day, day by day. Nothing more than to feel quite, *quite* sure she is not going away from me. And every day brings fresh hope, every week fresh assurance.

"Into the haven where we would be," I murmur, lying on the rug, leaning my head against the chair I have forsaken, and gazing at Maggie's quiet face as it

ends over her book. "And so," I hum myself softly, "Thou bringest us unto the haven where we would be, where we could be; and so Thou bringest us into the haven where we would——"

"Not yet, Nina *mia*, not quite yet," interposes Maggie smilingly.

To the uninitiated eye she appears more ailing now than when she was in anger. She has lost her pretty colour, her eyes are not so bright, and her face thin; her hair is rather thinner also.

It is a good sign, the doctors say, this falling off of her hectic loveliness.

"Not quite yet," she repeats wistfully.

"Not for you, perhaps, darling," I make answer, staring contentedly at the deeply burning fire; "but for me, who am so old, it has arrived to me to be content, to sail into this haven, and be at rest."

"I'm afraid it is not much rest you have, poor Nina. When shall I, I wonder, be able to get another situation?"

"Don't talk of it," I say hastily. "We have had enough of situations, goodness knows. The only engagement I will ever give my consent to again, my heart, will be a marriage engagement."

The colour rushes to her cheeks. The beautiful vivid flush that the doctors condemn floods all her face. She says nothing. She has been silent regarding her lover since his wife has died, and since she herself has been pronounced "out of danger." Now that there is "no impediment," her maiden shame, or pride, has taken alarm; now that the test can be brought to his affection, she can hardly bear to think of it, much less mention it. The lawless, defiant passion has suddenly become sacred, and sacred

also the womanly modesty and reticence that rises up to greet it. When this joy was something to be snatched, something that required daring, she was defiant, desperate; now that it comes to her, falls at her feet, she bows her head and is silent. . . .

I cannot break this silence. I begin to talk of other things; of Dr. George, for instance. She begins to smile when I mention him.

"Have you noticed," she asks, "how his love is waning?"

"I do not fancy it is."

"Ah, how should you know! Yet, believe me, the doctor is regaining his reason. I read the signs."

"I am glad to hear it. One lover is enough, Maggie—one true lover."

"One true lover."

In truth I feel a vague uneasiness con-

“And rare flowers——” He checks himself, for he catches my lowering eye.

“Fade early,” finishes Maggie gaily. “It is almost worth while being a rare flower, notwithstanding. A short life and a merry one is my motto.”

He is silent, and again I feel kindly towards him because of the earnest glance of his blue eyes toward my darling.

Very shortly he takes his departure.

“Another convalescent,” says Maggie contentedly, curling herself up on the sofa. She is fonder of lying down than she used to be.

“I am not so sure,” I respond.

“Oh yes ; a man must be pretty well heart whole to—to speak as he spoke.”

And a woman pretty deep in love to blush as you blush, I muse, as the lovely eloquent colour floods her face and tinges her tiny ears.

as not stand between us, but upon the hearthrug, warming his hands by one of my very best fires. Maggie's face says that Maggie's lips cannot, that she is very, very glad to behold him again. He is, or was, at her old occupation of sewing. She is just finishing my best winter dress, a dark red merino, made to measure, as only Maggie can fit a dress to my figure. A lovely figure, she declares, only made the best of; but of a contour delicate, she further asserts, that it is sily slurred over and spoilt.

Mr. La Touche, I have leisure to serve, does not look any the better for his sojourn abroad. He has the appearance of fatigue, and he does not, no, he *as not*, look happy.

It may be only a trick, this miserable expression, caught from his untrue marriage. And yet, suddenly, as I think

these thoughts, his face lights up as Maggie refers him to me, and he turns to question.

"Is it so?"

"I don't know, I have not heard what you were talking about," so say I, at a loss.

He smiles, and looking at me dreamily and yet with this light upon his face and in his eyes, does not take the trouble to explain.

"I was telling Mr. La Touche, that you once had a lover, long ago, and that you care about him still, though it is thirteen years ago. I was telling him, to show him that some people can love for ever; he does not believe in it," said Maggie incoherently, with very red cheeks.

And he, he keeps smiling at me, his ~~his~~ slow, bright smile.

“You have made a mistake, Maggie” (I am pleased at the calm sound my voice has), “I never said I loved this man *still*. It was you who used laughingly to say so. I knew full well that I had ceased years ago, *years ago* to hold him dear.”

I do not look at him, and where I sit it is dark, for the screen throws a shadow over me.

“Oh, Nina, how base of you to fail me in my need,” says Maggie’s voice with a shy tone in it. “You were the only proof I could bring, and now——”

He laughs a little.

“I want no proof,” he says. “I believe in—anything you do. I recant.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AND as the winter darkens and deepens upon the outside world, the sun of *my* content rises, higher and higher, and shines ever brighter upon *my* world. It is a narrow world, this of mine, narrow, but warm, so warm; and the queen of it is Maggie, and her subjects myself and one or two others. It is a cosy world and a prosperous. I want none other sphere.

On New Year's Day I hear they are engaged.

"All is well that ends well," I cry joyfully, holding my pearl fast, fast in my arms. "All, all is well."

‘Why, Nina,’ says Maggie smiling and shining, while two great tears come and land in her brown eyes, “don’t you remember that is what the Shulamite man said of her son when he was dead. ‘It is well with thy child?’ the prophet said, and she answered, ‘It is well.’” “We are not dead yet, Nina *mia*, and we shall say it is well until then——” “Ah, here is Mr. Williams again,” she breaks off suddenly, as, with no further announcement than a loud knock from Minnie’s hard-working fingers, the door opens and, behold our long-lost curate! He has shaken off some of his *mauvais hôte* apparently, for he makes his way to Maggie and takes both her hands in his.

‘I am so glad, so glad,” he says eagerly, “to hear the news. I wish you to tell me all; you and Mr. La Touche.”

Then this is the way some men love, I muse, regarding his truth-speaking face. And as I so regard him there springs suddenly a remorseful intensity of desire in my heart that Maggie might have been his wife. Ugly, insignificant, poor, of no account, and yet with a soul of pure and steadfast truth, a soul that could never forsake nor waver, a soul she might have leant on as on God. . . .

I suppose his blue eyes, so blue and so clear, waken this absurd thought in me; they seem to have grown bluer than ever, and the "wicked city's" smoke has failed utterly to dull their lucidity.

"It has travelled fast, this news," I hear Maggie say. "We were only engaged yesterday; but F—— is such a clever town, it always anticipates this sort of thing."

"Weddings and funerals, yes," he

responds. "Have you seen anything of my substitute?"

"Nothing," I interpose. "Maggie would none of him. She has been ill, you know, and Mr.—Mr.——"

"Johnson."

"—— is ill, dreadfully weak and all that, and when he called she said he would make her worse to look at him, and so——"

"And so Miss Maggie had her way, as she always has at last," he breaks in smilingly. "I am sorry," he subjoins, "that you did not make Mr. Johnson's acquaintance, he is such a nice fellow."

"Oh." I respond indifferently, for I know that every one is nice according to Mr. Williams' account of his fellow creatures.

"How well you are looking," he says to me, turning his eyes upon me fully for

the first time since he has entered. "I never remember to have seen you looking so well."

"It is my gown," I say. "Maggie's own work; don't you admire it."

He looks at her again and forgets to answer me.

"You have been ill," he murmurs, and I mark his hands entwine themselves in their old nervous fashion, "and even now you have not quite recovered."

"Quite, quite, quite!" she declares gaily. "Take Nina's dress as a proof. Could any one have made so beautiful fit who was not in the halest health?"

Still he does not look at me.

"You will get quite well, I don't doubt, in the summer, but now I miss the old——"

He hesitates. I hate him for his hesitation. I know what he misses,

at I miss. Something that God has
taken from my darling ; a subtle beauty
which will never wear again in this world ;
and yet how lovely is she still !

We begin to talk of other things.
Mr. Bland and his son, it appears, are
planning to give a dance to celebrate
George's engagement. It is news to
Maggie and I, this last. Mr. Williams
informs us of the fact, also he endeavours
to describe the bride-to-be, "The
daughter of a well-to-do farmer," Maggie
rejects scornfully yet smilingly when
he declares her to be as to appearance,
slender, and stout and fair.

She is not, however. She turns out to
be the only child of a retired tradesman.
The first I can remember in F——. And she
was only sixteen.

"Common flowers bloom early," quotes
Maggie.

"And rare flowers——" He checks himself, for he catches my lowering eye.

"Fade early," finishes Maggie gaily. "It is almost worth while being a rare flower, notwithstanding. A short life and a merry one is my motto."

He is silent, and again I feel kindly towards him because of the earnest glance of his blue eyes toward my darling.

Very shortly he takes his departure.

"Another convalescent," says Maggie contentedly, curling herself up on the sofa. She is fonder of lying down than she used to be.

"I am not so sure," I respond.

"Oh yes; a man must be pretty well heart whole to—to speak as he spoke."

And a woman pretty deep in love to blush as you blush, I muse, as the lovely eloquent colour floods her face and tinges her tiny ears.

"Never mind," she resumes after a pause, "as you say, there is one true lover left."

And as she speaks he comes, this man she still calls true.

We never know when to expect him. He stays at the hotel in the town for a fortnight or so, and then suddenly leaves on business, or pleasure, and reappears as suddenly.

To-night he makes one of his theatrical advents. I do not know he is in the room until he has greeted Maggie. Then I spring from my sleepy attitude on the rug, and make haste, as is my custom, to flee away.

But he retains my hand in his, and asks half defiantly for my congratulations.

"They are yours," I say gravely, and the firelight seems to leap up and cling about my figure. How akin is light to


colour, especially of a crimson hue. I begin to hate this red dress of mine. For his eyes follow the flashes of the flame upon it, follow with a provoking exactitude these spiteful gleams.

"You said you were going away to-day," says Maggie.

"I meant to," he answers slowly, and the fire gives as it were a sudden laugh, and its light glows upon me and lends its glow, its chance evanescent glow, to his eyes; "but I—I'm only mortal, and, in short, I couldn't tear myself away." So he says, and I know he means and feels the words by the earnest quiver in his voice, which does not lie as do his lips. Yet his eyes are on me.

"You are looking at Nina's dress," observes Maggie.

"Am I? I didn't know. . . . I was thinking of something else." And



he turns from me and I make my escape.

And on my dress, as I sit by myself during the evening, there seems always a glow and a gleam as of fire.

CHAPTER XIX.

"WHY on earth do you run away direct¹ Edward comes into the room?" ask^k Maggie half-fretfully the next morning.

"Two is company, my dear child. I am old enough to know that," I make answer, sipping my coffee with a good relish.

It is evident that I have taken a new lease of life. There is even a pink tinge in my cheeks. How wonderful a tonic is joy. When Maggie's life ebbed back again, with it mine, which I had not missed, came rushing helter-skelter keeping pace with hers in a stormy fashion.

"It is ridiculous," says Maggie, frown-

ing. "It looks," she adds, "as if I had made you never remain with us, and it—don't wish him to think that. He asked yesterday why you always went away."

"I thought—well, I will stay a little, if you like, dearest. Just wink at me when you wish me away, and I'll understand."

So when he comes, as is his custom as the day begins to darken, I restrain my impulse to flee, and sit by the fire mending a glove. I know Maggie is laughing at me, for she knows I never can make a decent job of a rent glove. Yet I must have some occupation. And there is none other convenient.

Maggie has been sewing, too. It is her favourite employment. She lays the work aside as he enters—discarded quite it lies upon the arm of the sofa, on which

they sit side by side. As for me, I stick to my glove, and the fire scorches my face. Usually my skin does not feel the fire flames, to-night it catches the heat, and burns, and burns.

I can see his arm stealing round her as they sit so. I can see them though I do not look, and I know how their eyes are meeting. Her head sinks against his shoulder, and the glove trembles in my hand. . . . I lift my eyes for a moment, and meet—his.

I rise. I cannot help it. I cannot, *cannot* stay while he—while the whole room seems one flame.

“Where are you going, Nina?” It is Maggie who asks the question, lifting her face from its resting-place.

“The room is so hot,” I mutter; “so stifling.”

She springs up and puts her arm

ut me, and leads me back with tender,
ling words.

'Hot, of course, when you sit *into*
fire. I will open the window.

'No, no," I cry.

It would be scarcely a wise proceed-
" strikes in her lover's voice, "with
r delicate chest. It is snowing. . . .
e is your work." And he hands to
my silly glove, with its wild rent
e wildly mended.

take the glove from him, but I do not
: at him. How I wish I could! Fairly
honestly to regard him for a moment
ld, I feel, set me right, but I cannot.
proposes some music. Maggie echoes
proposition with delight.

But first," he suggests, "we must
and make Miss Delaine comfortable."
e fetches the screen from the other
of the piano, and places it before the

"Why don't you call her 'Nina?'" asks Maggie, watching him. "Surely it is about time."

He is settling my chair in the shelter of the screen. He does not answer immediately.

"Perhaps," he says at length, as he turns and indicates the nook he has prepared for me, "perhaps she would not care for me to so address her?"

"You may call me whatever you like," I declare hastily. "It can make no difference whatever," I add more collectedly, seating myself, and seeking for the needle I had left sticking in my half-mended glove.

"What will you sing?" asks Maggie gracefully and lazily rising.

They stand side by side. The handsomest couple in all the world. I can see them, I can see them, though my lids


seemingly cast down, and I can pray
resting on their golden heads ; an
st, hearty prayer, notwithstanding
maddening fever that stirs and creeps
; my veins, turning my blood to
. . . .

The serenade from Figaro," I hear
Fie saying presently. "Oh, I must
told you about it. It is quite a long story.
once had a lover, as I told you the
day——"

Maggie."

has her hands in his. Her head is
ily thrown back, in a saucy attitude
rs. Her eyes are full of mischief
laughter. What a bonny face it is !
under his eyes are glued to it.

His name was Coulter, a Mr. Coulter
army. Have you ever met him ?"
—I don't remember ; but go on.
; became of him ?"



“Ah, there lies the tragedy! No one knows; he vanished, vanished, vanished,” emphasizing the word by lifting her hands, still held in his, and dropping them every time she utters it. “And one day I come upon Nina unawares, and find that she has been singing the serenade from Figaro, *his* song, his own particular song, and, would you believe it, such a rage is she in at my friendly chaff about it, that she tears the wretched music into a thousand pieces, and curses the day she was born—that last is only a figure of speech, of course; yet she *was* in a wax. It made me believe all the more in her constancy——”

“Maggie, do talk of something else; these reminiscences are not interesting.”

“I think they are,” he says holding her hands, still holding her hands, and looking at me.

And there rises in my soul a great hatred against him, or what seems to me hatred, so bitterly and wildly do I feel towards him. His eyes have no business to speak so to mine while *her* hands lie in his, trustingly, so trustingly. . . .

"I hate the past," I say savagely. There is nothing in it I would recall, if I could, except the presence of our mother. No face in it I would review, *lovingly*, except hers."

"Ah. . . . Then let us have some music. I think I can improvise an accompaniment to the serenade; and if our sister will bear with me and her *inst*, which I fear I shall unavoidably call, I will try and sing." I can hear he is smiling by the sound of his voice.

"Don't mind me," I mutter gruffly.

I do not move from my seat, which is near the piano. I am determined to

show him that he cannot agitate me with the past. A sublime obstinacy takes possession of me. I take my heart, as it were, unto myself and commune with it.

As for Maggie, his voice draws her to his side directly. She stands by him as he sings, her face all astir and aglow with feeling; tenderness, passion, sorrow, chase each other over her eloquent features. Her hand touches his shoulder as she rests it on the back of his chair. No wonder he sings with passion. The old, old tones, and the old expression tenfold stronger. . . . My darling, he loves you better than he ever loved me!

Tenfold stronger the feeling that shakes his voice now. How it vibrates! How the passion in it seems to strain, and swell it, and trouble it almost to breaking. . . .

I am thinking of the snow, how it is

falling, falling on the outside world. The tears of the angels, falling—falling from sheer pity, and covering for awhile our graves. Purely, coldly falling on all the wreckage of the world. Hiding, with the utter vanity of mad compassion, scenes of grief and crime untold, and making glitteringly fresh the old worn paths where the blood-stains are; the sad land-marks, the cross-roads where our parting was, the way-side where we sat and wept. For awhile, just for awhile to make all things new, all things white, old and white! Passion cannot live in his new world, with the flowers that bid us “forget not” it lies hidden, soothed away. Only for awhile—yet still for awhile the fever sleeps. . . . Something—some far away sound stops. Maggie’s voice breaks in, instead of the troubling, striving sound, her dear voice utters itself—

4

"Does he not sing it beautifully? Far better than your Mr. Coulter used to, Nina?"

"I dare say; but to tell you the truth, dearest, I was thinking of other things, and I hardly heard the song." And I meet his eyes calmly, as he bends upon me his glance, full of defiant angry inquiry.

"And may we know of what you have been thinking?" he asks. His voice is still hoarse from the strain of his passionate song.

"Certainly," I respond airily. "I was meditating upon the snow, thinking how pretty it must be making everything outside, reburying the dead——"

"Rather a useless proceeding, isn't it?" he interrupts.

"Yes; but not less useless, and more soothing than trying to *raise* them; and

at there are people insane enough to dig for comfortably entombed bones, to do their utmost to piece together these old relics of a bygone age, and make a hastily representation of life with an imperfect skeleton."

"These people act so in the pursuit of science," he rejoins, with a perceptible pause before the last word.

"And would you believe," I continue, my mood of hardihood still upon me, would you ever believe, that there are some mad folk who try and endow these wretched dug-up things with *life*, with nerves, with passion?"

I have risen, and am proffering him my hand, for though Maggie has not winked, yet it is high time she did. He does not take my hand. He rises also, and in doing so, bars my passage from the room. "And did it never occur to you to


wonder what drove this poor soul mad ? he asks gently. "Could it not have been *love* of this long-buried thing, *this* imperfect skeleton, half ludicrous, half sad to others, to him still living—*still* beautiful——"

"Good-night!" So I cut him short, for I feel my *sang froid* forsaking me, and I am fain to confess he has again the best of the war of words.

CHAPTER XX.

AM dressing for the Blands' dance. Ggie is already dressed and in the living-room. It is, I am afraid to say, so many years since I have felt the t, the hurry, I feel now in making my let. I am young again. In my teens, I could say, by the feel of me. And my weeks ! I know not what has arrived to me, as the French say. They are so , so glowingly, yet dimly red.

On my bed there lies the yellow dress, soft maize of filmy material, that is to harmonize with my new complexion. Ggie has chosen this colour for me. Ggie has made the dress. I shall look



pretty in it. No, not pretty, better than pretty—attractive. The queer, undefined charm of my plain face shines forth bravely to-night, has intensified itself to a pitch that is uncanny. I watch it, and wonder at it, and am glad, downright madly glad of it. I put on my dress eagerly. I observe the effect with passionate gratification.

Thirteen years have made no change in me. It might be that old dance I am going to. It might be that old excitement that now enlivens all my being. He will not notice any difference. This new flush has hidden the thinness of my cheeks, and my eyes are as bright, fully as bright as when—— Stop! what am I saying, what am I thinking?

There crawls out of the soft becoming dress, clinging with such a flattering grace to my figure, a *serpent*. Out of a

ubtle fold it rears its ugly head, and
isses at the cowering image in the glass
hese words—

*“ You are trying to dazzle the eyes and
in the heart of Maggie’s lover. . . . ”*

Ten minutes after, when Maggie enters
a her sheeny white dress, she espies a
mall woman in black, which makes her
ook smaller still, and does not suit her
ingy hair and pale face. This small
lain woman is soberly changing her
hoses. She looks up at the lovely white
ision, and there is a wistful, but perfect
atisfaction in her eyes when they rest
upon her sister.

“ Enter the belle of the evening,” she
murmurs.

“ Nina ! not dressed yet ? ”

“ Yes, nearly ready, sweetheart, nearly
ready. I—I changed my mind about the
maize dress, darling. Don’t be angry.

I—I somehow didn't feel *comfortable* in it."

"Doesn't it fit?" asks Maggie anxiously.

"Perfectly; but, you know, one takes such funny dislikes to some dresses, and I'm so unaccustomed to evening toilet. This is quite respectable. It is only three years old, and I sha'n't be noticed in it so——"

"But, Nina, it *doesn't* suit you; and that other——"

"There, never mind, let your old sister have her fads in peace. How well your dress becomes you."

I cannot take my eyes off her. The old vivid colouring is hers once more to-night. One does not miss the bloom, the very first freshness, from my rose just now, because of the glow that bathes her, the beautiful transforming

low of the sun that is rising upon her life.

"Look what lovely flowers he has sent. Lilies and jasmine and narcissi for my bouquet; and for you, violets—such violets."

I take the fragrant purple bunch from her, and lay them on my toilet table.


"I have put some of the narcissi in my hair. Do they look well? One would not miss them out of the bouquet. Aren't you going to take your violets?"

I have filled a vase with water, and am giving the lovely blossoms to drink by placing them therein.

"They will last longer in water. I can paint them to-morrow. I wish I could paint their scent."

I bend over them and inhale their sweetness, worshipping it.

"Come, come, it is time we were off,"



says Maggie; and I leave them to go forth their dreamy odour to the lonely, darkened room.

“What are you laughing at, Nina?” asks Maggie, as we stand disrobing in the ladies room, waiting for our chaperonage, in the shape of a Mrs. Vane, a grass widow.

I am laughing because I have caught sight of Maggie and myself in a mirror, and the contrast of our personal appearances is mirth-provoking. With my pretty yellow dress I have put off, apparently, my unusual colour. I am plain and pale enough now to satisfy even my morbid imagination.

“I wish you had worn your other dress,” says Maggie, guessing, as she glances at the pier-glass, why I laugh. At this moment Mr. La Touche comes

own the stairs. We can see him through the half-opened door, and he catches sight of us by the same means. He pushes it more open audaciously, and calls her. She goes to him, of course, and I follow. He places her hand upon his arm, and then he looks at me, looks at me literally from head to foot.

"Our chaperone has not come," says Maggie, as with a sudden movement he turns to mount the stairs.

"Never mind," I interpose, "I will wait for her here. You can go and dance."

And I laugh to myself again as they hurry away to join the dancers.

It is some time before Mrs. Vane appears. She herself declares that she never was punctual to any appointment in her life. To-night she is true to her character. We enter the dancing-room

during the fourth dance. Mrs. Vane *is* in great request. A goodly portion of *the jeunesse dorée* belonging to F—— *that* have favoured the Blands' entertainment, have evidently been waiting for her coming, for they pounce upon her. She is but a small morsel among so many. I cannot discover, or do not care to, which gilded youth wins her hand for the present moment. There are not a hundred people in the room, yet, being a very moderately sized apartment, it is crowded. I seat myself, and watch for Maggie. Soon I catch the glimmer of her white dress floating, it seems, in and out among the dancers.

"The belle of the evening," says a little old lady by my side, seeing where my eyes are fixed. "And the man she dances with, so handsome and distinguished looking. They are engaged, I think?"

I answer in the affirmative, and my heart warms to the little dried-up wallflower as she joys in her simple old-fashioned way in the joy of my pearl. How well they dance together. It does one's sense of harmony good to watch them in their gliding, airy movement, as if it were by the breath of the music. Mr. La Touche waltzes as only an officer fond of, and apt at the exercise, ever does waltz. And to Maggie, for heaven knows, she has had no practice, waltzing seems to come as naturally as a strange grace and activity of limb. The couple in most utter contrast to them in waltzing power, come under my notice. Dr. George is evidently indulging in an unwonted pastime. His partner, his *fiancée*, I conclude, is vainly endeavouring to imitate his eccentric notions.

"Another engaged couple," chirps ~~the~~ little old maid by my side.

Dr. George has chosen wisely this time, I muse; this fair, plump girl, with her pretty, good-humoured face, is the very woman to counteract his fierce fretful temper, by her sweet stupidity. He will never wear her out by his impatience, he will never sadden her by his gloominess. She is dressed in blue, she has blue eyes, and a great deal of colour. Ah! there is her mother. One can see the likeness still, in spite of the fat which has diminished the blue eyes and overwhelmed the *nez retroussé*. There is the same good-humoured smile that nothing, not even obesity, can extinguish. A sweetly inane soul smothering in flesh, looks out benignly yet from this aged and grotesque countenance upon the world it has found "very good."


In the meantime Dr. George has trodden upon his beloved's dress, and the thin material has yielded to the strain to an alarming extent. They are obliged to halt. And the girl, laughing at his dismay, seeks her mother (I knew it was her mother), with most of her skirt rolled up under her arm and held tightly in her plump, white-gloved hand. The old lady rises unperturbed, and, taking her daughter's arm, or holding her torn dress, I cannot see which, hurries her out of the room.

Dr. George saunters up to me.

"Good evening," he says, and seats himself.

The superannuated wall-flower moves discreetly further off.

Maggie and Mr. La Touche whirl past us, lightly, gently, with apparently effortless velocity. Maggie's cheeks are the



colour of a scarlet geranium. By the expression of her half-smiling mouth, the gleam in her large dark eyes, I know that my pearl is happy, unutterably happy. Still regarding her, I bethink myself of addressing Dr. George.

“Allow me to congratulate you.”

On his continuing silent, I turn to him and perceive that he has not heard me spoken amenity. His eyes are on Maggie, following every turn of her willowy figure, every shimmer of its silken sheath. . . .

Dr. George has lied. His passion is not dead. Debased, distorted, denied, it burns in his glance now, it shortens his breath, it whitens his dark face, it pursues my darling horribly.

“Why do you let your sister dance? It is destruction.”

“Dr. George—why?”

"She is not fit for it. The excitement and exertion might kill her—— There, they have stopped."

"How happy they look!" I exclaim voluntarily. They are so close to us we can see that Maggie is panting slightly, and see the quiver of her lips, as she smiles at her partner.

Dr. George has turned to me, and is regarding me with a puzzled look in his ill, dark eyes.

"And because they are happy, are you?" he questions.

"Certainly. If Maggie is happy, I am."

"And it is so some women love!"

"And men, sometimes."

Dr. Bland in passing down the room has stopped to talk to Maggie. She is laughing at some sally of his. Mr. La Roche's eyes are on her brilliant face. I laugh to myself again.

“ You and he have forgotten all *about* those old days,” observes my companion.

I laugh outright this time. And as I laugh, Mr. La Touche turns towards us, his eyes meet mine, and hold them. . . .

“ Are you sure ? ”

Having whispered these words Dr. George leaves me, and betakes himself to Maggie. He is evidently suing for a dance, and Maggie has conceded to the request, for he is writing his name on her card.

“ How bewildered and flushed you look, Nina,” says Dr. Bland, as he takes his son’s place and regards me benevolently. “ You are not used to these gay scenes,” he continues.

I put my hand up to my cheek, to which Mr. La Touche’s gaze has brought back the burning, unusual colour.

The room is comparatively empty now.

Only the chaperones and wall-flowers and one or two non-dancing men are left. The band, consisting of a woman who plays the piano, and a man who plays the violin, is refreshing itself.

"Let us go," I say to the doctor. But he excuses himself on the plea of having to look after some high and haughty dame, whom he has temporarily forsaken.

"After this next dance is over, Nina," he declares, "I will come for you, and we'll have a chat."

So he leaves me, and presently the dancers come trooping back, and the orchestra invites them to form for the lancers.

How "out of it" I feel! How lonely and discarded! Maggie has Dr. George for a partner. She does not look one wit depressed at the contingency. Mr. La Touche is dancing in the same set, with

a lady I do not know. She is plain, and rather stout. He will watch his betrothed's movements in preference to hers, I opine. Was any one ever so graceful as Maggie? In this dance, more even than in the waltz, her suave, swaying figure shows the exquisite liveness of its every motion. It is a feast to my artist eyes to—
Again the hot blood burns in my face, for his eyes are seeking me, though Maggie dances before him—seeking me in my dull corner, in my black dress. . .
They will not leave me, these eyes fraught with I know not what of questioning intensity. *They will not leave me.* . . . I turn away. I bend my head and examine a bit of my frayed skirt. When I look up I meet them still. It is unbearable. Blind, confused, I rise and flee.

At the door I meet Dr. Bland.

"I was coming for you," he says.
"Where shall I take you?" he asks.

"Anywhere cool, and dark. It—it is
right here—so hot."

He leads me to the conservatory. It
is lit with Chinese lanterns, but dimly

He talks to me, but I cannot rightly
attend to what he says.

There are one or two couples in the
greenhouse. We nearly tumble over
Mrs. Vane and a very young man sitting
on the entrance step. She is teaching
me the rudiments of flirtation, fashion-
able flirtation. He is an apt youth
apparently. Presently she will lead him
to the higher branches of the art.

Dr. Bland and I proceed to the further
end of the house, and seat ourselves
behind an orange tree. A lovely creeper
climbs in our faces. A passion-flower, the
doctor tells me, and the strong sweet

scent that greets us and clings about us is from his favourite Cape jessamine. He picks several stephanotis blossoms and gives them to me. They lie on my black dress like snow—most fragrant, unearthly snow. I am thanking him, when a voice calls him, and I am left alone again.

The couples playing at love-making slowly saunter away, tired perhaps of the make-believe passion; Mrs. Vane and her boy-pupil get up and walk off. His first lesson is over, satisfactorily over.

What ails the flowers to-night, that their scent should creep into my veins, like some strong drug, setting my blood on fire, stealing my thoughts from me, causing my heart to throb madly, as at the touch of an over-dear hand? And his eyes find me still, through the gloom they look upon me, full of an angry yearning, of a passion stronger, wilder,

more importunate than the old love.
Though I hide my face, I cannot shut
them out, any more than I can dispel the
intoxicating maddening flower-scent. . . .

“Nina, all alone. . . .”

It does not startle me when his voice
takes up the strain, shaken by the same
form that cause me to cower; pervaded
by the overpowering sweetness that
poisons me. ’

Would to God I could find where-
with to answer him! that I could bid
him not to name me in that tone.

He seats himself, and takes one of the
blossoms from my knee.

“Where are *my* flowers. . . . You used
to like violets. Those roses, too, that
I sent you once, you gave them—away.”

As I move slightly from him, a swaying
passion-flower, dimly splendid, touches
my hair and sweeps its cool petals against

my forehead. Shuddering, I raise my hand and tear the taunting thing from its green tendril, casting it at my feet, placing savagely my foot upon it.

“Nina *mia* !”

Oh, my heart, if he should hear your panting! Hush! for Heaven’s sake, be still! Beat lower—if needs be, *cease* to beat. . . .

“Silent? And yet I can see the dark eyes full of speech. . . . And the hand that tore that flower down, the foot that crushed it, they are eloquent too. . . . Why are you not dancing?” His voice has sunk to a whisper.

“Because I am too old,” I hear myself saying; and my voice in its hoarse whispering matches his.

“Old? Are you? You ought to be, and yet— How *is* it some women never seem to grow old? Is it because

they have no youth to lose? Nina, shall I tell you what I expected to see when, when we met? Well, a *middle-aged* woman, face hard and placid, hair orderly and thin, figure gone, voice dry and harsh, and I saw—you. . . . A delicate, defiant little face; resolute, angry eyes; a mouth bitter, and yet with a smile, when it deigned to smile, so sweet, so—— ”

Staggering to my feet with the weight of his tenderness clinging to me like lead, I seek to go.

“ Do not—do not go.”

And the hand he lays on mine, trembling at first, closes round it gradually with the unyieldingness of fate.

“ Let us put an end to this farce. It has been asleep, the old love,” he goes on in hurried, shaken tones. “ I thought it was dead, and you perhaps thought it was dead. . . . We have been mistaken,

Nina, mistaken; and now, it wakes ~~like~~
—like a giant, my God, like a giant
refreshed.”

There comes a sound of voices *gaily*
chattering—a confused sound, and *then*,
clear as a bell, Maggie’s laugh.

Slowly, even within hearing of *that*
laugh, even at the near approach of my
dearest, even then but slowly, but re-
luctantly, Mr. La Touche’s clasp of my
numbed hand loosens; and I, staring like
one bereft of reason into my sister’s
astonished face, as she and Dr. George
confront us, fall forwards fainting, moan-
ing weakly as I fall, and catching blindly
at the branches of the orange-tree to save
myself.


CHAPTER XXI.

' SHE will come soon,' I think to myself fearfully, as I wait in our sitting-room for Maggie's return from the Blands' ill-fated lance. I am feeling sick and weak, having not recovered my swoon by any means, notwithstanding Dr. George's ministrations. It was he who brought me away from his house and left me sitting here, as I have been sitting for the last hour, stunned, stunned and sick.

" Soon she will come."

Who? Why, my darling, my pearl, the one love of my soul, my troubled, trembling soul. And I am afraid to meet her. Merciful Heavens! *Afraid!* If I could overcome this faintness, and

put on the front of honesty. But no—no—as well ask the murderer, meeting the ghost of his victim, to bear himself as an innocent man. I am afraid, afraid, afraid! I would I could steal away and hide myself. But I am too sick to move. I must wait and—— A silken rustle on stairs, a light footfall, the door flung wide. The belle of the evening stands within the room, her shawl sliding from her silken-clad shoulders. . . . There is none to speak to her here within this silent chamber. No one to congratulate her upon her triumphant loveliness, upon the successes of her evening's campaign. She used to have a sister Nina, who loved nothing better than to speak of these things, who was never tired of singing her praises. But, poor soul, she is sick to death, and sits leaning her head upon her hand like one stunned.



“Nina, are you dead?”

“No.”

“What is the matter with you? Haven’t you recovered your faint. It’s new thing for you to faint—quite new. don’t wonder that you are ashamed to look me in the face,” goes on the hurt, poignant voice, “after having deceived me so—so abominably. It comes very suddenly from you, Nina, who are always preaching about truthfulness, to act as you have acted towards me. . . . I don’t know if I shall ever feel the same towards you again. . . . I know *all*—all,” she says tragically.

She leaves her wraps lying where they have dropped, and begins restlessly to pace the room. One would think she has had enough exercise for one night, dancing as she has danced. Backwards and forwards, backward and forwards!

And all the time I am sitting as one stunned.

Suddenly my wrists are seized, and I am dragged to the light. For the first time in my life I look into the eyes of a jealous woman.

“And he used to love you. . . . Were you like this when he loved you? Like *this*—the same pale, limp, die-away creature? You have no colour, Nina; no beauty of feature; no beauty of any sort. I can’t *imagine* his ever loving you, and yet ” (peering yet more earnestly into my fearful eyes) “you say, they say, he certainly used to love you.”

“He—certainly—used—to love—me,” I repeat with difficulty.

“I suppose you were better looking then. You had youth, at any rate, and that goes a long way. Pshaw!” (throwing away my hands) “you needn’t look

as if you had committed a crime. After all, what does it matter? The only thing that annoys me, is that you, you should have kept it all so secret. It was wrong of you, Nina, you who always preach so, who were so angry when I didn't tell you about—about everything."

"I have been very wrong," I own, beginning slowly to breathe more freely.

"If I thought that *he* had willingly deceived me," goes on Maggie unheeding, "it would kill me. Yes, you need not start so, Nina, I mean it; but it is not so. . . . He has explained everything about it." She seats herself wearily as she speaks. "Everything. How you wrote to him—— You needn't deny it," as I make a sudden movement.

"I'm not going to. I only want to sit down," I respond.

"Asking him not to reveal your former

acquaintance with him; and how since then you have repeatedly urged the same thing, until he was obliged to, out of gentleness, to do as you desired. It was wrong of him, but he did it reluctantly."

"Indeed."

"Coulter — Edward Coulter. How strange it seems," she goes on restlessly. "And all the time you knew that Mr. La Touche was your—your—the man you were once engaged to! And I chaffed you, yes, I actually chaffed you, about it before him. Now I see why you always ran away when he came. . . . Dr. George let out the tremendous secret," (trying to speak in a lighter tone). "Something he said accidentally made me suspect, and I wouldn't rest until I had wormed the whole story out, though he had promised Edward not to reveal it to any one. . . . How was it

"I knew Mr. La Touche was Mr. Coulter before ever you had seen him?"

"I am just going to explain, to instantly deny, when something in the stful, puzzled eyes of Maggie makes me refrain. My lips quiver, and close again, and I hang my head. I cannot, I cannot shake her faith—her faith entwined so tightly with her life, already weakened.

"I wonder how you knew? You will not say, Nina? How guilty you look! I knew perhaps that he had taken the name of La Touche?"

"I bow my already drooping head. God give me!

"Ah, well, you did it for the best; to spare me pain, and all that. I must not blame you too much, but you see, Nina, that it was not necessary; you see how perfectly indifferent I am to this old—old

story. You see how I laugh at it, how I treat it as a joke, a very good joke?"

I try and answer her smile, or what she means for a smile, but I shake my head.

"He did not hasten to come near you, did he? although he knew you were his old love. . . . *I brought you together, after all?*"

"Yes. Let us go to bed, Maggie. These reminiscences are tedious."

"Not yet, not yet." As I stretch out my hand to her, having risen.

"And he has kissed you, Nina," she continues half shyly, "many a time. . . . And what made you faint?"

"I was tired, I am tired."

"How changeable men are."

She takes my hand and slowly rises, slowly with a weary doubt in those great brown eyes of hers.

Changeable," I make answer, "until
I have the one they love best—the
true love."

And how is one to know?"


How childish she looks all at once!
How childish the large, asking eyes;
half-pleading, half-petulant gesture
of little hands!

"My darling," I say, and my voice is
suffused, my eyes running over, "there
is only one thing I *dare* to bid you know,
that is, the love of your old sister, Nina.

It will never fail you, sweetheart."
But she thrusts away my clinging
arms. Of myself and my tears she has
no need, she would say. She passes by
haughtily; her childish helplessness
disappears as by magic.

CHAPTER XXII.

“Is there no way?” I sigh feverishly as I toss from side to side all that long winter’s night, “is there no way, no way, no way out of this despair?” Think long enough, and a way must appear, they say, a way out of hell itself. And as the tardy daylight steals into the room, and finds out Maggie’s calm face to point white fingers at, there comes on the wings of the late stirring wind a voice which says to me, “Go away, far away, far away. You can no longer care for your pearl while you are near her. From afar, from afar, must you guard her, and save her. Once away” (the



low chill wind whispers hoarsely), "he will soon forget his new emotion. It is but the warmth of ashes once burning. He will forget you sooner this time than he did the first time. Patience, the way is clear. As constant as ever he *can* be to woman he will be to your dearest. Has she not two potent charms to hold him, youth and beauty? And you, you have been *once* forgotten, and practise makes easy. The lesson is conned. Your fate is prepared."

* * * * *

It is nearly twelve before Maggie finds her way to breakfast. Her long rest has apparently completely restored her.

As she sits making her repast, I gaily unfold my plans. I have settled, I tell her, to accompany Miss Ryan to the seaside, where she is bound for the purpose of spending two months with a

solitary but rich aunt of hers. Miss Ryan made the proposition to me some time ago, indeed, before Christmas. Until now, when I feel out of sorts, particularly out of sorts, I have not given a thought to the invitation. And now, I go on in spite of Maggie's protestations, I have been over to the vicarage this very morning and arranged matters, and, in fact, this evening we start on our journey. Maggie, at this juncture of my discourse, begins to battle against my decision. It is taken, however. For once, for once, my pearl cannot shake my resolution. It is taken.

"I have not forgotten you," I proceed, when she will let me. "I have been to Mrs. Vane and asked her to give up her present lodgings, which she hates, and live with you here until I return. On Monday she is coming. This is Thursday.

You will only be alone three days. She will bring little Bertha with her as a toy for you."

"I don't want toys. I don't want Mrs. Vane. I don't want Mrs. Vane's children. I want you. *Nina mia*, why do you go?"

I take her twining hands from about my neck, and tell her to look at my cheeks—they have put on an extra pallor to-day. I bid her to feel my galloping pulse, my hot forehead.

"For my good," I tell her with dry lips, "for my own especial good." And herein do I speak the truth.

She never leaves my side during the remainder of the time I am with her. She helps me to pack. I find her, when she thinks me preoccupied, regarding me with an attention quite new. She is wondering, wondering through all her

pain at parting from me, what there was in my plain face to attract a man's love—*such* a man's love. Where are the charms on which he feasted his eyes in those old days? her scrutiny seems to ask. Well, I always 'used' to wonder myself. Now I can see the attractive power plainly, contained as it is in plain features. A power from within, giving expression to the eyes and mouth, casting a pathos on the pallid cheek, moulding, indeed, each feature to its will. My face is plain, but not a mask; and so at times it is beautiful. I saw it so this morning, as I combed my hair. A slow, dim flush mounted in my cheeks, emphasizing the pallor of my face; my eyes, growing shy with remembrance, were yet full of veiled fire. And all this at a chance thought.

Maggie will persist in packing up my yellow dress. There is no knowing who

I may meet, she says, or where I may be asked. I tell her I shall make seaweed designs the "correct card" next Christmas.

I take leave of my dearest in high spirits; and for once Miss Ryan and myself are in a kindred mood. Everything is charming. To parody a well-known couplet, we "find beauty in engine smoke, and food in musty sandwiches." I become almost light-headed from merriment. I feel inclined to pull Miss Ryan's nose from sheer *bonhommie*. Like a strain of solemn music, the great grey sea suddenly looms in sight, and breaking the false excitement of my mood, quells all my laughter. Then again, like sunlight over the solemn sea, there greets me Miss Turner's smile.

Miss Turner is "a sort of" aunt to Jane Ryan. I will call her Jane from

henceforth; we made the compact while eating the unpalatable sandwiches. Miss Turner is the cousin of Mr. Ryan's wife, so I make out with some trouble; so really only a distant connection of Jane's. Very distant that sweet smile from Jane's eternal grin; very distant the tones of that worn voice from any notes in Jane's cheerful diapason.

She has had a romance of course, this lady whose guest I am. What single woman of sixty has not some love tale to relate or keep silence upon? Miss Turner is not austere, as her years would argue, nor melancholy, as her solitary position might imply. She is a gentle-faced, blue-eyed, grey-haired old lady with whom I am at my ease in ten minutes. I tell her all about Maggie before bedtime, and she falls in love with her. Jane, with a more beatific smile than

usual upon her jovial mouth, knits busily, and listens. I discover presently that this lady of sixty might well have numbered only sixteen years, as far as knowledge of the world and the passions of humanity are concerned. She is a child, a gentle, wise and tender child; a tutored, docile, understanding child; a child with none of the faults of youth, and all its virtues. And we talk of Maggie as though she were our mutual sister, and the dark tragedy that hangs over Maggie's life lies buried in the heart of one of us. It rises presently from that heart, and influences mournfully all the night through both the waking thoughts and the unwelcome dreams of an over-tired brain.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE next day a most cheerless companion attaches herself to me, rises with me, eats with me, my bread tastes of her tears; drags upon me when I walk, sighs when I speak, groans if I laugh. Homesickness, avaunt! I cry stoutly. I do my best to hide her grim presence. I will have none of her! I will not commune with her. I think of other things, her clammy finger on my pulse, her tears on my cheek. I do not give in, but I make a sorry fight of it.

Miss Turner is concerned to observe, after a week's interval, that I do not appear to derive benefit from the sea air.

"Is it too cold for you?" she asks gently, as I, managing a smile with ill success, declare myself all right.

It is towards evening, and the twilight is gathering. Jane is still out, scenting the sea-breeze, of which she can never have enough.

"But you are not 'all right,'" says the child-like woman, stretching out her soft withered hand to draw me near her.

Obedying its behest, I seat myself on a footstool at her feet.

"It is not 'all right,' when one finds it hard to smile, to speak; when it is all one can do to keep the tears back from eyes that have all the world's woe in them."

"To tell you the truth, Miss Turner, I'm desperately homesick. Isn't it absurd? I have heard from Maggie every day, and know that she is well

and happy. You see, I have never been away from her since mother died, and I didn't know quite what it meant?"

"Poor child! What shall we do for her? I have a plan, a capital plan," the kind old lady declares, laying down her knitting, her face beaming with goodwill. "I'll ask Maggie here, Maggie and Mr. La Touche——"

"Oh no, no, for Heaven's sake!" I interrupt wildly, springing from my lowly position. "I pray you not—I——"

"My dear!"

The aged, childish face quivers with surprise, uncomprehending surprise, as it lifts itself appealingly.

"Forgive me. I mean, I could not think of troubling you. He—she—they could not come," I go on, trying to recover my breath. "It's very kind of you, but impossible—totally—utterly impossible!"

“ And what is ‘ utterly impossible ? ’ ” asks Jane, who, entering during my speech, has caught the last words. She is laden with sea-weeds, and her appearance would very fairly represent health, only the picture would not make one in love with health. Part of her plait has been blown loose, its coarse tendrils sway without grace against her ruddy cheek.

“ Why,” says Miss Turner in a slightly piqued voice, “ Miss Delaine declares it impossible that her sister and Mr. La Touche should come here, and I thought it would make things so pleasant.

I am examining one of Jane’s sea-weeds, it trembles in my fingers, as it used to tremble when a storm stirred the depths around the stone it clung to.

“ Why is it impossible ? ” asks Jane loudly. “ Why ? ” echoes Jane’s wide open eyes. “ Why ? ” echoes Jane’s

jubilant hair. "Why? why? why?" echo all her features and her clothes separately, it seems to me, as she turns and surveys me.

"Because," I answer steadily, "Mr. La Touche *cannot* come, I know. He is attending to Fairthorne. He is making all sorts of renovations in it. When he is not there, in F——, I mean, he is in London, busy about other matters. And unless he comes—of course Maggie likes to be where he is?"

"Of course, of course. Let us say no more about that matter," responds Miss Turner, irritation still in her tone.

"It was very kind of you," I begin. She checks me.

"Not at all. I should like to see Maggie?"

And would not I? I cry to the seaweeds. My pearl, my pearl!

“Do you admire that one?” asks Jane, conscious of some uneasiness in the moral atmosphere, and with the kindness that saturates her poor nature, making it worthy, she ignores the subject that seems to stir the trouble.

“Yes, I do,” I answer heedlessly, and forthwith enter into a disquisition upon sea-weeds in general and the one I am to copy in particular.

“Will not those children be rather a responsibility to your sister?” says Miss Turner later, breaking in upon our animated discussion.

“Those children?”

“Yes. I understand Mr. La Touche has two children?”

“Oh, *they*, they are not his children nor hers. They are the children of the Baroness’s former husband, he was a widower when she married him,” I make

answer quickly. "And," I add, "their paternal grandmother has adopted them."

"So they're out of the way," subjoins Jane gaily, grinning round at her relative. "And everything is out of the way now, and there is room for the triumphal wedding procession headed by the fairest bride—— Nina, I fancy you will look scarcely less joyous on that occasion." And then, finding I do not respond, she breaks off and begins to praise the sea-breeze, the waves, the whole dreary outside panorama of this most wintry winter day.

"And when is your sister to be married?" strikes in Miss Turner's soft voice presently.

"In the summer," I answer, looking up from the sea-flowers I am really grouping for my design. "Early in the summer."

“*In the summer—early in the summer,*” echoes Miss Turner dreamily. “Every good is always coming *in the summer*. The lovers are to be married, the sick are to be strong, the absent to return—*in the summer*. *My* joy was coming to me once, one summer long ago. . . .”

She paused to count some stitches in her knitting, then resumed, the click click of her needles accompanying her low old voice.

“And the summer came, and I never wished for summer to come again. . . . Jane, my dear, ring for the lamp; and, my dear, what makes you so gloomy?”

CHAPTER XXIV.

“HAVE you ever heard the romance of my aunt’s life?” asks Jane the next morning as we await in the breakfast-room Miss Turner’s descent. “She touched upon it last night when she said I was gloomy, don’t you remember? She always says that if she happens to think of—of her old sorrow——”

“And the sorrow?” I ask lazily. I feel but small sympathy with such a long ago grief, now that the present—Jane interrupts my thoughts.

“It is a short story. She was engaged to be married to an officer. He had to

go out to India. The summer he was to have returned, he died."


"And there an end! I like stories with ends to them, finales. It is so seldom life puts really a full stop to these little tales. If I had had a romance I should have liked——"

"Nina! what are you going to say? You would have wished your lover to have died?"

"I should perhaps wish now that he was dead," I answer oracularly.

Jane's mouth opens and does not shut again until Miss Turner enters and she bids her an affectionate "Good morning."

All the morning I work industriously at my painting. Jane comes in and out gustily, like the sea-breeze when the windows are open. They are shut, and to-day there is no air stirring. The sea is asleep—greyly, mistily asleep. The sky



is grey. The town lying below us is grey with the smoke that clings to it. The sea-weed that I am copying is grey, and in my heart there is a grey peace. I am promising myself a holiday—some spare hours in which to think about my homesickness. And when Miss Turner and Jane urge me to come and drive with them after lunch, I fulfil this promise to my patient soul. I refuse the drive. I refuse the company. When Miss Turner's smart landau has whirled away, drawn by a pair of bright bays, I betake myself, carrying joyfully my solitude in both hands as it were, unto the bare cliff's side. Miss Turner's house stands by itself on the cliff above the town of Fresh Wave. This town has broad streets and bright shops, also an esplanade and a pier, also some capacious hotels. Miss Turner's landau has taken its giddy course in that

direction. I wend my lonesome steps in precisely the opposite. After a walk of nearly a mile I find the spot I seek: a grassy hollow, half-way down the steep cliff's side, steeper here and higher than close to the town. I am alone with the cliff, the sea, and the sky. Stretching my limbs upon the short dry grass, I draw from my pocket Maggie's last letter, and for the second time to-day I peruse it carefully. It is full of hope. There are no forebodings, no half-expressed anxieties. Mr. La Touche has left F—— for a day or two, but before he went he was tender and kind, kinder than ever.

I lie back sighing with relief. The storm, sudden and sharp, has passed away as these thunder clouds always do. When he is married to her all will be well. His inconstant nature cannot but be true at last to so perfectly beautiful a bride.

The ~~sky~~ grey water below makes never
a ~~man~~ of warning. The placid sky, the
sterile rocks all share my tranquillity.
At last I sleep, whose nights have been
so wakeful: at last I dream sweetly,
whose dreams have been so terrible. A
light upon this dream! It is sweet—it
is restful as heaven. But there is poison
in it, the poison of his presence and his
love. I am with him again as in the old
time, when there was nothing between us.
When youth and innocence and joy were
ours, all ours. Maggie does not enter into
this dream. Nothing makes my heart
afraid. Only the gladness of his nearness
is intensified by some vague feeling
of long absence. His arms are twined
round me, his breath is on my cheek.

“I am in heaven,” I murmur, waking—
and waking I find his arms around me,
his breath upon my cheek.

“And I,” he says, “am in heaven also.”

In a moment I have freed myself from his embrace. Speechless, panting, mad with astonishment, I stand as I have thrown myself, against an overhanging rock. Nothing breaks the oppressive silence. The ocean has nothing to say. The sea gull flying close, close to its calm breast, hears no whisper, no hint of danger or distress. . . .

“What have—you—come—for?” I whisper forth at last.

He advances a step, his hand outstretched.

“Touch me,” I gasp, “and I will throw myself down the cliff.”

He withdraws his hand, which trembles, clenching it as it drops at his side. Never once does his glance travel from my face; it seems to hold me crouched against the rock.

“What is it?” I cry under my breath again. “Maggie?”

He makes a gesture, a passionate movement, as one who puts a trivial object aside.

“What folly this is,” he says roughly. “It is time to have done with it. . . . Nina, you were dreaming of me. You spoke my name, once, twice. You were in heaven you said” (his voice falls to a whisper in spite of himself), “in heaven, tell me. . . .”

I cover my face with my hands to shut out his eyes.

There is silence for a moment or two. Only I can hear him breathing, as one who struggles to subdue some strong emotion—struggles to speak and put it by.

“Nina, it is useless to deny it, you love me as I love you,” as he speaks, loudly, angrily, he seizes me by the wrist.


At the same time conqueror of his agitation and master of my movements.

“ You love me, love me, love me! Why, Nina, what is there to be ashamed of. . . . It is only what you used to do long ago ; and I, what have I done ? Oh ! don’t shudder so. I never even kissed you ; and if I had, it would not have been the first time. I will not let you go until—— ”

“ I *hate* you ! ” I burst forth madly. “ I wish you were dead—except for her, for her. I could *kill* you ! ”

He kisses my struggling hand again and again, and again.

“ I don’t care—love me, hate me, I will have you, though Heaven and hell were against me. . . . Listen, oh, listen to reason. Do you think I don’t know that Maggie is young and beautiful, and that you are plain and, well, if you like, old ? Do you imagine I cannot see how much



fitter an arrangement it would be for me to marry, her? Do you fancy that I do not love her——”

“I knew——”

“Love her,” he goes on, still holding my wrist, while he twines his other arm round my waist, “as I have loved a great many women. It is a good sort of love as far as it goes, but” (bending down his head until his lips almost touch my ear), “I love you as I have only loved one woman in my life, that one—*yourself*.”

“Maggie, Maggie, Maggie!” I cry with a great and exceeding bitter cry, every feeling overwhelmed in an agony of apprehension.

“Maggie will be all right. I have done my best for her; as yet she knows nothing—but——”

“Let me go,” I gasp painfully; “you are killing me.”

Seeing and feeling that my strength is really spent, he reluctantly complies, and I, unable to stand without his support, sink to the ground on my knees.


"Little woman, little woman," he says softly, and there is a world of pitying tenderness in his voice, "I cannot help myself, nor you—it is our fate."

"There is no truth in you."

"None, except, in my love for you—that is true enough, too true. . . . Perhaps if we had been married long ago, and I had had you, I might have been true in other things, as it is——"

"There is no truth in you? O God, in heaven, have mercy upon us, and for once make you true!"

"For *once* I have been true. For *once* I *am* true. Nina, do not fight against fate. I found you to-day by the merest chance on this cliff's side, fast asleep,



naming in your sleep my name. I found you, as I was seeking you, madly seeking you, knowing you to be at Fresh Wave—and seeking you against every dictate of common sense and reason, against my own will, and it is strong, as strong as yours——”

“No,” I exclaim whisperingly, as I stagger to my feet, “not quite, for—for I say good-bye to you Mr. Edward La Touche for ever, mark me, *for ever*. I *dare* you to speak to me again.”


I turn, and with the strength of the will I have so rashly pitted against his, I hasten up the steep path, and go home with the fleetness of one who flees, with fainting pulses, for his life's life.

CHAPTER XXV.

made a great mistake, Nina, not
going with us." So Miss Turner when
she left her house.

It was simply charming. I never
had such a delightful drive. There was
no wind, no sun, and just that delicious
mildness. Oh, Nina, you should have
come." So Jane effusively.

I, unfortunately, have not strength
enough to reply to them. I find a chair.
I murmur vaguely. I sip the tea they
give me with dry lips. The kindly dusk
is falling. Jane's eyes are losing their
aggravating stare in the dimness, and
Miss Turner is inclined to doze. I cre



away to my own room, and when dinner time comes and lamp-light, I appear just as usual, and Jane sings in her feeble fashion a song I do not hear until these words strike suddenly into my numbed senses—

“They who loved so well of yore,
Meet again.”

And the door opens, and a letter comes for me by the local post.

“*Nina mia*’ (it runs), “*I must see you again. Whatever you think or feel, I must see you and speak to you again before I leave this place. I shall be where we met to-day. I shall be on the same spot at twelve o’clock to-morrow noon. If this hour does not suit you, write and name one. My address is—The Royal Hotel.*”

“*Yours,*

“*E. La Touche.*”



look up from the perusal of these
s to find Jane's eyes upon me, and
unusual alertness in Miss Turner's
vements as she knits. They make no
mark.

"What was that song you were singing,
Jane?" I ask desperately.

"'Evermore.' Do you like it?"

"Sing it again, do, I—I hardly heard
it."

She complies, and my indignant
thoughts talk loudly to me, accompanied
by the thinnest of soprano voices, and
the jingle of a piano.

"'They who loved so well of yore,
Meet again, meet again. . . .'"

hums Jane as she quits the piano and
comes gaily to the table to make the tea.

"You have tired yourself, Nina. I
noticed it when you first came in. You
made a great mistake——"

“A great mistake, a gigantic blunder,” I interrupt impatiently, thrusting the note into my pocket. “All this is easy, Jane, but how to repair the error, that’s the question that presses.”

“Go to bed,” says practical Jane.

“Is that the solution?” I ask, laying my hand for one instant on Miss Turner’s as it knits restlessly. “Miss Turner, can you not help me?”

“I’m afraid not,” she answers without looking up. “It is hard to when one does not understand.”

I stand for a moment or two looking down on the peaceful white head, the busy white hands.

“Do you ever, when you say your prayers, pray for those who might happen to be in sore trouble?”

Her calm, serious eyes glance upwards.

“ I say the Lord’s prayer every evening, and add certain private petitions.”

“ And do you never think, you who are so safely housed, of those labouring perhaps in mid ocean, tossed hither and thither, and the rocks lying in wait while the under-currents alter their course, and—— ”

“ Have you a dear friend at sea ? Then indeed I will offer up a prayer for such. No wonder you are anxious ; but *now* it is so calm ! ”

“ It appears so here. In some latitudes there are deadly storms raging. Yes, I am anxious ! I cannot disguise it, horribly anxious.”

And as they regard me perplexedly, I lift my hands to my head, and press my throbbing temples.

“ Good night, Miss Turner, good night. Jane, I am indeed anxious.”



For three days I do not venture out of doors. On the fourth day Jane lays a missive on the table where I am at work upon my sea-weeds. As I open it and read its contents, I am aware of the same ominous silence in the room as when I perused a like despatch a short time since.

"This will not do. I must see you. If you will not come to me, I will come to you. For your sake alone I refrain. One more chance I give you. Come to the Royal Hotel at three o'clock to-morrow in the afternoon, or I come to you at Miss Turner's at four on the same afternoon. If you care for Maggie's happiness you will come to me."

"Yours,

"E. La Touche."

Careful of the eyes upon me, I put the note into my pocket composedly, and go on with my painting.

“Are you not very clever at acting?” Jane asks me innocently on the evening of the same day as we sit placidly at dinner.

“I never tried!”

“Now, in theatricals, I fancy you would make such a success.”

“I never acted in theatricals.”

“Your eyes, your voice, your manner, all remind me of an actress I saw once in London—the only time I ever visited the theatre. I enjoyed it so much,” etc., etc.

I have a trick now of not hearing Jane’s conversation beyond a certain point.

To go, or not to go, that is the question that I perplex myself with for

many ensuing hours, while all the time my resolution is taken, and all the *pros* and *cons* upon the subject are only as the wash of the ebb and flow above the rock planted in the depths.

In the face of a determination, no matter how harmless, how innocent, there arise always obstacles innumerable, contingencies unthought of. The morrow dawns brightly. There is sunshine. Before two in the afternoon it clouds over, rain begins to fall. It is difficult to make excuse for going out, especially as I have lately persistently stayed within doors. I find I have a headache. I find that with this headache it is impossible to pursue my painting. I find that I rather like the rain; that wet weather is of all things the most enjoyable to my peculiar temperament. I make my exit from the parlour under cover of all

these "findings," and when I have donned my outdoor things, I find Jane awaiting me, also clad to brave the elements, with the addition of a pair of goloshes. We go out together. It is unavoidable. I walk fast; I walk slow. Nothing, of course—oh! Heaven, save your imperturbability, my Jane—*nothing* discomforts my companion. Three o'clock strikes loudly from the churches as we parade the dripping pavement of High Street. I am in a strait between two evils. I choose what I consider the lesser. I stand stock still and confront my wet but beaming escort.

"I—— The fact is—I—must leave you here," I say with a sorry attempt at cheerfulness. "I have to make a call," I further explain, after two very wet labourers have pushed passed us smoking vile tobacco, "a call at the

Royal Hotel," I proceed hurriedly. "I have a friend there—staying there, I mean—a very *old* friend."

"Oh."

"A ridiculously old friend—I just heard this morning from him—her, and they wanted me so much to go and see them. We can see the roof of the hotel from here, close to the station. I won't drag you all the way up to it."

But Jane does not need dragging. Alas! she comes willingly; in fact, she insists upon coming with me to the very door of the Royal.

"Au revoir," I say pleasantly. "I sha'n't stay long. Keep the tea warm for me—— *Hadn't* you better be returning?" I add desperately, for Jane does not leave my side.

Has a suspicion of something wrong stolen into her guileless heart? does it

flicker uncertainly from her astounded eyes? Perhaps. At any rate she waits until my ring is answered. For the space of about ten seconds the hall porter and myself stand staring unwinkingly at each other. Jane doubtless is staring at us both. I am "at bay!" I am desperate.

"Is Miss—Jones within?"

"No such purson lodging here, mum."

I am staggered, but with dogged courage return to the attack.

"No, of course not" (with an impatient laugh at myself), "she is Mrs. Smith now. I find it so hard to remember" (this an aside to Jane). "Please" (imperiously to the dubious official), "ascertain if Mrs. Smith is within?"

He retires—to my inexpressible relief, he retires. Jane, in her utter surprise at my erratic proceedings, has forgotten to

shelter herself with the umbrella she holds. Rain-drops are coursing down her large cheeks. One big timorous drop has begun a perilous journey down the uneven bridge of her nose. I watch its descent with interest. Before it is completed in safety the hall-porter returns.

"Mrs. Smith is within," he says.
"What name, please?"

"Miss Delaine."

Then I turn and nod good-humouredly to Jane before I follow — my fate. Through the hall, up two pairs of stairs. A door is thrown open, and I am ushered into a room, where reclines upon a sofa an oldish lady of stately appearance. She rises as I enter. I turn abruptly from her to the man at the door.

"There is some mistake," I urge hastily. "I asked for a Mr. La Touche — *Mr. La Touche*. Pardon, madame"

(again I turn to the innocent victim of my ruse), "there has been a blunder. Mr. La Touche," I reiterate angrily to my other victim, as I retreat.

"Mr. La Touche—of course, of course, but——"

"Mr. La Touche, show me to his apartment at once."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE door has opened and shut. We are alone together. He does not come a single step to meet me. He stands where he has risen, from his chair by the open window. The light muslin curtain swaying in the breeze catches at his folded arms, as it were a hand entreating and restraining.

“What do you want?”

It is I who break the silence. Moving not towards him. Oh, Heaven help me! moving never an inch towards him. And the swaying curtain lays its persuading hand upon his arm.

“What do you want?” I reiterate, for

he keeps regarding me silently as one might a ghost, with the same steadfast, fearful look.

The clinging muslin drapery is thrust aside as, in a couple of strides, he places himself by me and seizing my hands whispers one word—

“*You.*”

“I might have known better than to trust you,” I say wearily, turning aside my face. “You never fulfil your word.”

“What word, what trust have I broken now?” he urges, albeit he releases my hands in a conscience-stricken manner. “I want to talk to you—to ask you,” he recommences. “In the meantime take a seat. You are tired.”

I refuse. I can see how great the restraint he has put upon himself. And I am determined to bring our interview to a speedy close.

“What shall we do?” he says absently.

“How shall we settle it?”

“Settle what?”

He smiles slightly as he watches me.

“Uncompromising little soul! Why are there not more like you—more women with dark grey eyes of utter fearlessness and utter sadness. My God——” breaking off suddenly, “*how* I worship you—and you——” (again he controls his vehemence). “You don’t know, how should you? we cannot feel for each other in just the way that makes—makes—— Listen to me, Nina, what is best to be done?”

“Will you abide by my decision in the matter?”

“How eagerly, yet calmly she speaks! Doubtless she has some crushing scheme in hand. Something swift and hopeless. Oh! Nina, Nina, Nina! and there is no

Fibre of your body, no pulse of your heart that does not respond to my passion. . . .

There—I beg your pardon. Unfold your plan—I am all attention.”

I turn from him with a sudden sob of irrepressible excitement. “You have brought me here for nothing. I knew it.”

“I have not, upon my soul,” he answers hastily, following me as I move to the window.

“Will you do as I ask you?”

He does not answer at once. I go on slowly—

“If, as you say, you have loved me, as in truth I once loved you. If so be it that we have really loved each other——”

“Why put it in the past?” he interposes hoarsely.

“——in all good faith, and in all good faith given each other up, and still, still the love—your love would seem to linger.

And if I ask a favour of this love" (I am looking up into his face now, and thirteen years have been blotted out), "will it be strong enough to grant it? It used to be a gallant thing, a fair and dear thing, I would have trusted my life to it in the old days" (those kind blue eyes are suffused, and all the dreary years are drowned in their depths); "now I would—would fain trust more than my life."

He does not speak. Only he looks at me with his moistened, softened eyes, and his lips shake.

"More than my life," I whisper through my tears, finding it hard work to make way against them. "Edward—more than the *old life*."

"What do you want?" he asks roughly, like one in pain beyond bearing.

"That you will, for a few short



months even, continue to love her, to appear to love her. Just now your desertion would kill her. If it must come to pass—be merciful, be gentle, for a few short months.”

He is silent. His head bowed, his arms crossed.

“A few months, four or five; and then, if at the end of that time you still find——” . . .

“You will pay me,” flinging out his arms suddenly, “if I do this, you will pay me.”

“Never,” I assert recoiling. “I ask you to do this thing out of your love, not for any reward.” But he advances as I retreat, he will not be put off.

“Swear to me that if I am for the next five months to your sister as—I have been—at the end of that time you will give me yourself. Swear this to me, and

what you wish shall be done. It is a hard task you have set me, yet it shall be done on one condition—that at its completion you give yourself to me.”

He has his arms round me now. Face to face we stand staring into each other’s eyes.

“Yes, or no. On your answer hangs your darling’s happiness, remember—*your darling’s happiness*. . . . Well, yes, or no?”

“Yes.”

Merciful Heaven, what do I hear? Is it the laughter of a thousand fiends, as they echo my “Yes” again and again?

“A pretty answer, upon my word, and a pretty attitude, and a pretty scene. May I congratulate you? I am just in time, am I not?”

We are apart now. Far, far apart now,

and Dr. George stands in the space between us, bowing and sneering.

“Why, Bland, what brings you here?”

“Curiosity, my dear sir, the same old failing. It has made fools of us all. I retire, *pleased* to find I am no exception.”

“I say, stay a moment,” Mr. La Touche exclaims as the doctor makes for the door.

“One moment—I want to explain.”

The doctor’s head reappears for a second.

“The situation explains *fully*, thank you. I wondered why you were so long away, and *she* also. I have learnt; ta-ta.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN the grey dawn of the succeeding day I am aroused by an unwonted hand, by an unwonted voice. I am hard to awaken, I think. At last I open my eyes sleepily and behold Jane. Jane in a strange garb, half night, half day; and in the dim light her face appears pale. I sit up in my bed alarmed.

“Good—good-day, Nina.”

“Don’t,” I answer crossly, “I have a superstition about being wished a good day. Never wish me one, please.”

“I—I won’t, I never will again, as you don’t like it.”

“How your teeth chatter! What on earth is the matter?”

Jane is trying with trembling fingers—I never thought *her* fingers could tremble—to fasten her gown over her night dress.

“What *is* the matter?”


“I—I came for a little chat,” says Jane. “May I sit—sit down?”

She plumps herself down on the chair by my bedside while she is speaking. Her voice is not nearly as loud as usual. I did not think *Jane's* voice could ever sound so faintly.

“Well?”

“How pretty you look, Nina dear, with your hair all ruffled over your head, and that cheek, one cheek so flushed, like a baby that has been asleep.”

“Did you come here to talk about my good looks. A poor subject at the best of times, but now——”



"How did you find Mrs. Smith yesterday? Was it yesterday?"

It occurs to me suddenly that Jane is perhaps walking in her sleep. The hour, her strange manner, and speech. I have heard that it is most dangerous to awaken people abruptly on such occasions. Bearing this in mind, I began to deal cautiously with her.

"I found her very well," I say quietly. "I told you so last night, I think."

"Oh, so you did, so you did! And how many years did you say it was since you have seen her?"

It is very hard to be asked to recapitulate untruths that have in the first instance been forced upon you. Jane in her somnambulistic state shall not so impose upon my sense of rectitude.

"My dear Jane," I say in my most persuasive tones, "don't you think you

had better go to bed *now*, and talk about Mrs. Smith, or any other—thing, later in the day? I'm so sleepy."

"Of course, of course," agrees *La Sonnambula* agitatedly. "I—but I—I really have something to tell you."

She fumbles with something hidden in the breast of her half-fastened gown, fumbles with her red, coarse hands, trembling as they never do when she is awake and rational. I wish she were. Jane in her sober senses is bad enough. In her sleep-walking she is appalling.

"Nina, dearest, remember, in all our troubles, there is One who can save to the uttermost. . . ."

Is it I or Jane who is asleep? What is this brown, crumpled missive, lying on my counterpane, straight before my staring eyes?


*"Dr. G. Bland, High Street, F—, to
Miss Ryan, The Grove, Fresh Water.*

*"Maggie broken blood-vessel. No hope.
Tell the sister. Both of you come at
once."*

CHAPTER XXVIII.


AFTER innumerable petty hindrances, after an endless dream-journey, I find at last another obstacle, another check in the arms of Dr. Bland. The old doctor will not let me go. On the very threshold of the house, where Maggie lies, he arrests me. When I am just about to see my darling, he holds me back, *he*, and I cannot understand what he is saying to me.

“The shock would kill her,” he says. What shock? The shock of seeing me? What nonsense, oh! what nonsense he talks. And he holds me all the time, and I used to count him as my friend! Holds



me, and allows Jane to pass, nay, encourages her to pass into the sick-room. He grows stern with me. His face looks set and pale. He takes me away, wearing the aspect of a jailer ; takes me away almost by force in his carriage, to his own house, and gives me a horrible potion to drink. It sends me to sleep. Nay, not to sleep—to hell. For always in my delirious unconsciousness I am consciously held away from Maggie in her extremity. Oh, the agony of that passive war! A war of myself against myself. All my senses sealed and stubborn, taking part against my raging sleepless soul. There was no mercy in the narcotic they gave me, rather a rending asunder of soul and spirit : a most dread dissolution.

“ Oh,” I cry in a voiceless whisper, as I struggle partially free from its influence, “ deliver me from this death!”



It is night, I discover. It was noon when I took the draught. It is night as I slowly struggle from its grasp. I am lying on a sofa in Dr. Bland's drawing-room. He himself is seated by me, bending over me. He is full of kindness and gentleness toward me, and at length, when his persistent soothing and my powerlessness have brought me to a quiescent stage of feeling, he begins to relate to me all that I want to hear. How that Maggie has been happy, as her letters have said, during my absence, and how well she has looked, and until yesterday, when his son was calling on her——"

"In the evening?" I interrupt faintly, "late in the evening?"

"Late in the evening, nearly ten o'clock. George had been away all day; and why he hastened to her directly on his return I cannot understand. . . . You

cannot rise, my child ; it is no use to try until the effects of the narcotic have left you."

No, it is no use to try. I cannot raise a finger. No, not a finger, to point him out as he enters, the murderer of my sister.

"Stay with her, George. I am obliged to go out. I have ordered her some tea. See that she takes it when it comes."

The old doctor presses the hand I am vainly endeavouring to lift, and leaves me alone with his son.

After the first glance, he does not look at me. He seats himself in an easy chair by the table, and leans his head against his hand as though in deep thought. The intense excitement of his presence renews my life. I can feel its forces stealing back in my paralyzed nerves and deadened limbs. . . . I bide my time. Perhaps half

an hour passes, before I find strength to rise. I have staggered nearly to the door when he, starting from his meditations, intercepts my progress.

“Where are you going?”

I fling away the hand he lays upon my arm. I will not answer him *yet*. I want to husband my strength until I shall have no further need of it. He follows me; overtaking me, he stands with his back against the door.

“You must not leave this room until you say where you wish to go.”

“Can you ask?”

“To *her*, you must not, shall not, cannot go!”

“Why? for God’s sake, *why*?”

“Because it would be bad for her.”

“Bad for her—I? Am I mad, or have you all gone mad? Who, who should be

with her, with my darling, if not I? Who has known her longer? who has——”

“Enough,” he says roughly. “I don’t want to argue. You cannot undo the past.”

“Murderer!” I cry, losing all control of myself. “Basest of anything that draws breath, you have killed her! May Heaven pour down its direst wrath upon your head!”

My voice rises into a scream. I shake my fist in his face.

He seizes my wrists, dragging them down as he bends to bring his face on a level with mine. “Know the truth,” he breathes savagely. “She *will* not see you. Maggie, your darling, *will* not see you. She *hates* you. . . . Can you guess why?”

“*Murderer!*”

“No. . . . Her death lies at *your*

door. You and he together have been the cause.”

He flings me aside. With the strength of the madness that inflames me I spring at his throat. My hands are on his wind-pipe, and there is murder in them. In another moment I am lying bruised and stunned upon the floor, panting, beaten, dying with futile rage.

“She-devil!” ejaculates Dr. George as he rearranges his neck-cloth and collar, surveying me the while with a sneering smile.

“Come,” he observes after a pause, filled only by my panting breaths which, instead of subsiding, seem to grow faster and faster; “come, it won’t do for the old man to find you like this when he returns. Get up, and——”

He takes hold of my strengthless hands and tries to raise me. Finding

this proceeding useless, he lifts me in his arms and half throws me, a huddled, breathless heap, upon the couch.

“She is dying,” I hear him saying, as one hears through one’s sleep the toll of the passing bell. “And I am glad. I knew what I told her would either bring her to me—or kill her; and I would rather she died than became his. . . . In spite of all this exaggerated grief of yours I have an idea you are glad also—you and he.”

All my pulses seem running a mad race. Faster, faster, faster they vibrate and thrill and shudder, until I am borne away upon their chariot wheels; wafted away by the speed of my own life to regions I know not. The white sneering face, the dull dark eyes fade, whirl round, vanish.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SLOWLY, and by painful degrees, I come to life again—on Jane's bosom. In the arms whose shape and hue I have so often derided, I draw my first troubled, conscious breath. At first I cannot speak. I stare up into the large brown orbs I have almost hated. They are as an angel's now, in their tenderness and ruth.

"What is the matter with me?" I ask with difficulty. My tongue feels thick and unwieldy.

"It is an hysterical attack, darling. You will soon be better, Dr. Bland says."

"I am only half alive," I say irritably.
"I cannot move my limbs, scarcely my hands—look!" I try to raise my hand. With terrible energy I lift it two inches, when it drops a dead weight upon my powerless body.

"You will soon be better—soon."

"How soon?"

"In about a week, Dr. Bland says."

"And Maggie?"

"She is a little better. Oh! Nina darling, have patience, *try* and have patience. God is in His heaven. . . . He will have mercy—upon us."

An angel watches by us during the ensuing week, watches between Maggie and I, watches above us, watches beyond us for the light that is to lighten our great darkness. For the shadow of death broods over us, and a shadow deeper and darker than any death divides us.

In the other world, I keep wondering feebly, will the light of which Jane so often speaks dispel *every* cloud, and show Maggie how after all I am what she used to think me?

I get better presently. My nervous force returns in some measure, and slowly begins to react against the intense prostration of my whole system. I can feed myself. I can sit up. I can walk carefully, like an aged person. I can speak as usual. And Maggie——

“Maggie wishes to see you,” says Jane. And try as she will to appear calm, I can see her mouth quiver, and her voice, all its coarseness vanquished by its tenderness, is weak with the effort it costs her to control it.

As for me, a great trembling seizes me. My new-found strength deserts me abruptly, I stagger to the couch speech-

less. Jane seats herself by me, and places her arm round me. There was a time when such close contact would have disgusted me. The touch of those faithful arms stills me now, brings back the blood to my heart.

“To see me?” I mutter piteously.

“To see you,” echoes Jane steadily. “All the old—mistake is over. She understands now. We have helped, have tried to show her something of what,—of how you have loved her.”

Half an hour afterwards I cross the sunny street dizzily, leaning on Jane’s arm. It is a bright March day. The sky is most intensely blue—blue as the eyes that first looked love in mine. The chimneys of the house where Maggie lies dying rise darkly against this radiant sky.

“Mr. Williams is with her. She can hardly bear him out of her sight since he

came after she was taken ill. . . . He is a great stay to her."

I can make no reply to this announcement. I am keeping all my failing strength, as dizzily I take my faltering steps by Jane's side across the sunny street.

We enter the house at length. Jane helps me to lay aside my hat and cloak, and then I essay to mount the stairs. Again Jane has to come to the rescue. After a painful struggle, I find myself in the presence of my darling. Oh, the bitter change that has come over that lovely face since last I saw it! It is not Maggie's face lying pressed into the pillow; it is but its shadow, its haunting, mocking shadow. . . .

"Nina, why, Nina."

Oh, shadow of the beloved voice! oh, faint and fleeting tones that even now speak to me from an awful distance!

"You are not looking well, Nina *mia*."

She holds out a hand to me, the hand of a spirit. Jane leads me to the bedside. I have no more volition than a stone. She places my hand in the spirit-hand.

"I don't mind much," goes on the far-away voice. "He" (turning dreamy eyes to the curate standing on the other side of the bed) "tells me such comforting things; and I know *he* could not tell a lie."

She looks into his stainless eyes, and a half smile flutters over her face. Mr. Williams has risen preparatory to going.

"Come again in half an hour," she entreats.

"I will."

She watches him as he leaves the room. Then turns to me.

"He has been everything to me, Nina. I don't know what I should have done

without him—died raving mad, perhaps.
. . . Nina *mia*, you musn't be *too* sorry."

A great cry bursts from me. A cry as of one whom the sword divideth. I do not know how it happens, but I know that I have Maggie in my arms again. I know that my lips are on hers, that her head is on my breast, nestling in its old resting-place. The beautiful little head with its ringlets of sunny gold, and the dear dark eyes, are so close, so close. . . .

"That is right, Nina *mia*—and we needn't talk about anything, need we? I'm so tired. I know that *he* was false, and you . . . as you have been always. . . ."


And so she goes to sleep.

* * * * *

After three months have passed, of their passing I do not remember much, I am

walking by myself in the evening of an exquisite spring day. I am walking, feebly enough in my heavy black dress, in the field where the pink thorn grows near Meadowsweet Farm. It is in bloom now, a huge nosegay of pinkest, sweetest flowers. I take off my hat as I come to a stand before the old thorn. My head is aching, it is always aching now.

“She is dead,” I say to myself aloud, for I cannot realize this thing. “She has been dead three months, three whole months, and I am alive. . . . I eat and drink and sleep. I am not much paler, and only that my head is heavy and stupid I am well. . . . I think of Maggie a great deal, always in fact. . . . When she was with me I sometimes forgot her. She is dead now. She picked a spray of this pink thorn last year. . . . She will never touch another flower or leaf belonging to



this earth—this fair, fair earth that suited her so in her young loveliness.”

I reach a trembling hand to the hawthorn, and break off a tiny branch.

Suddenly beside the thorn there stands the figure of a man outlined against the pale evening sky. Oh! it is horrible to see the mad joy with which his eyes are aglow! Horrible, most horrible to note the trembling eagerness of his outstretched hands; to be aware of his panting breaths, his near approach, when I am just beginning to understand that Maggie is dead. I turn from the apparition shudderingly, covering my face with my hands.

“I have been searching for you a long time. They told me you had walked in this direction—— Oh, my darling, do not turn from me!”

Horrible, most horrible, that shaken



pleading voice, full of the tenderness that has died with Maggie.

“Do not turn from me, do not turn from me. . . . My love, have you not suffered enough, been true enough? Oh, at last take comfort, give me my joy.”

“Hush!” I say in whispering tones, “hush! I cannot bear that word—most of all I cannot bear that word. I have heard it all the afternoon, and it has almost driven me mad. . . . This pink thorn keeps saying it, and the birds, even the very clouds, floating somewhere near perhaps where she—— And you, I hate to look at you,” turning round half fearfully, half curiously, like a frightened child to regard him, “you are, I can hardly believe it, but you seem to feel *glad*.”

“Nina, Nina *mia*, I am glad, glad and sorry too.”

“Leave me,” I cry passionately. “I

cannot bear to look upon you, or hear your voice."

"Have you not thought of me all this weary time?——"

"Never once," I interrupt. "I used to sometimes, when Maggie was here, but since she died I have never let her out of my mind. What a good thing it would have been if you had died long ago, or had never been born!"

I stoop and pick up the pink thorn spray, and gazing blindly at it, murmur to myself of Maggie, in the half insane way that has become habitual to me of late.

Presently I hear a sound as of some one sobbing. I perceive on looking round that Mr. La Touche has betaken himself to the wood half a dozen yards away, and, leaning against the stile, is evidently weeping.

"I wish I could cry like that," I say enviously, drawing near to him, attracted by his manifestation of grief. "Dr. Bland wishes I could too. He says I would feel better then. I used to be able to before Maggie died. . . . But I have nothing to cry about now. I don't care enough for anything."

"My poor child, my poor child!" he says brokenly, raising his disfigured face.

"Then you are sorry, very sorry she is dead?" I ask eagerly. "You really are sorry all the time that she has gone away?"

"Sorry? My God! who could not be sorry, and look at you?" he mutters hoarsely, covering his working face with his hand.

"I wish I could feel sorry about her like that," I say wearily.

"Poor child, poor child!" he whispers thickly, and he takes one of my limp hands and lifts it to his lips, and I feel his hot tears upon it.

"I think I will say good night," I observe after a pause, in an indifferent voice.


"One moment, and then we will go together. I want to tell you something—about Maggie. . . . You think me such a brute. I want to tell you—that I did my best when I heard—about—what Maggie thought of you, and me. I told Mr. Williams, the curate, the rights of the case, and asked him to make it clear to her—that nothing was *your* fault. . . ."

"Thank you," I say gravely, looking coldly at his wet and working face.

"Nina *mia*, Nina *mia*!" he cries wildly, stretching out his arms to me,

while his whole figure is shaken with his heavy sobs, "come to me and cry away some of the grief that is killing you. . . . Or, if your heart must break, let it break on mine."

"Do you know," I say musingly, gently pushing aside his hands as I take a step forward and lean on the wooden stile, "do you know that this time last year I would have given almost anything to have heard you say those words? Down there," pointing to the sloping bank beneath the trees clothed with flowers, "I lay and thought and dreamt of you, although I had not seen you nor heard of you for thirteen years; and you were up here, beside that thorn, yowing eternal allegiance to Maggie. . . . I saw you soon afterwards . . . and I was glad" (I turn from the perfumed wood to him, and lay my hand upon his arm), "thank



God, I was glad, after the first few moments, that Maggie had won to herself my old lover. . . . You see, I always loved her best, best of all. . . . I think I must have loved her even better than I knew, I miss her so madly. . . .”

Something in the bowed head of the man beside me moves me to a kind of cold pity.

“If,” I go on slowly, “it is any consolation to you to know that I have loved you, ever since we first met until now, you are welcome to the knowledge. . . . It is all dead now, all that feeling. I have hated you and loved you at the same time lately. All that is over, too, dead with the rest . . . and I am very tired.”

Slowly, after a long pause, he takes my hand from the wooden rail and lays it on his arm. Like the ghosts of lovers that might have been, we wander home

together through the twilight land. Not a word passes between us. We exchange no caress. As we near the town of F——, a carriage drawn by a pair of greys dashes past us. There are wedding favours on the horses' heads and on the driver's coat. Dr. George's white face is visible at the window. His sullen eyes survey us doubtingly as we walk together, and then the evening mist enfolding us, we vanish ghostlily from his ken for ever.

THE END.



